Keeping Safe

‘Keep talking, stay safe’

For people in custody during the pandemic, this is prison within a prison. A time of increased isolation and dependence, made better for some people by good communication, sound relationships with staff, routines and small acts of kindness. Blighted for others by bereavement, bleak conditions, uncertainty, fear, raised expectations and dashed hopes.

The Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) has just published a report into the experiences of those detained in prisons during the Covid-19 crisis. Our focus is on active steps to protect life. Drawing on National Prison Radio messages from over 200 people across 55 prisons, almost half the prison estate, the IAP presents voices, too often unheard, and views, too often unsought, of men and women in prison in unprecedented times. What is helping you to keep safe? What is making a bad situation worse?

The title of our briefing – “Keep talking, stay safe” – is taken from one of your messages and sums up the importance of clear, accurate and honest communication at a time of fear, risk and uncertainty.

‘Everyone’s frustrated. We’re behind these doors, we don’t know what’s going on. We’ve stopped having updates now. I used to get updates every 2 days or so explaining what’s going to happen. We’re just frustrated because we don’t know anything.’

Confusion was increased by high profile Government announcements which led people to believe that thousands of prisoners would be released early. On 4th April the End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) was introduced to create the headroom needed in overcrowded establishments to follow medical scientific advice. This would mean that new arrivals could be put in quarantine, people with the virus could be put in quarantine, people with the virus could be identified and those most vulnerable could be safely shielded. Two months later, of the 4,000 people who were first thought to be eligible, just 79 had been released. This complex, risk-averse scheme is hard to understand, difficult to explain and close to impossible to deliver, even for a disciplined service like the prison service: “…no sign of early release, no staff have any clue to this minefield. A team that cared and provided guidance for you, your partner and your children about what to expect before, during and after imprisonment and which guided you through it, had a chance to talk about their experiences, their family, their children and their hopes.

Evidence shows that conflict between parents which is frequent, intense and poorly resolved, affects their children’s health and life outcomes. This includes “silent treatment”, lack of respect and aggression towards each other.1

But what if there was a service that was free and which existed solely to help you navigate this minefield? A team that cared and provided guidance for you, your partner and your children about what to expect before, during and after imprisonment and which guided you through.

Leading relationships charity ‘Relate’ is pleased to be offering a programme to support you. The programme is called ‘Being Parents First’.

One of the Being Parents First counsellors, Chris, talks about the programme: “We’ve found that parents are coming to us because they find every conversation becomes an argument or that they are unable to talk to each other anymore because they are so resentful of the situation they find themselves in. Many parents we support feel the benefit of having time to talk together to understand each other and explore how they can argue better and communicate differently to help their children feel happier. We’re working with parents who haven’t lived together and don’t want to, and that’s ok, but they have had a chance to talk about how to be parents together and sort out practical issues about contact. It’s a safe place for two people to have the conversations away from their children, to understand and how their arguing has affected their children and what they can do differently.”

“One family has finally engaged with their teenager who had refused to talk to either parent since the dad came home from prison. They learnt to listen to him and not vent their anger towards each other in front of him. It’s amazing to see how giving these families time to talk makes such a difference.”

What happens on the programme and how do I apply?

Couples and ex partners accepted onto the programme will have a trained Relate counsellor to support both parents over a 6-8 week period. The counsellor will explore any causes of conflict, how this impacts on the children and will help you look at different ways to improve communication and how you sort out arguments. During the pandemic we are running sessions by phone or video calls where possible. We can also have contact with you by email.

Juliet Lyon is Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP).

Juliet Lyon CBE

Information

‘Being Parents First’

Support to cope with relationships

Anxiety, separation and short, rushed moments of communication can make it challenging to be a good partner or effective parent from inside prison. Going to prison does not make someone a bad parent but coping with being away from your children and partner can be hard. During time in prison, relationships will often change.

First, a safety net: The governor says that we’re working as a community, that’s all you need to know.

We will do all we can to help you have what we all want - better relationships with our loved ones.

Visit www.relate.org.uk/beingparentsfirst

Email Being Parents First, RELATE, 58 Preston Rd, Brighton BN1 4QF.

Call us in confidence on 0300 003 0270

Write to us at Being Parents First, RELATE, 58 Preston Rd, Brighton BN1 4QF.

If you or your child’s other parent is due for release within the next few months, or you have been released in the last year, then we would like to hear from you. However bad things seem, talking can help.