


TOM'S STORY



When I was six years old, my dad went to prison, but I was not aware until I was eight. He spent the majority of my childhood inside. I was confused when I learnt that my dad had actually been in prison for all those years and not away from home working like my mum had told me. My mum had felt a lot of shame around the topic of imprisonment and so, had found it easier to hide it from me. This made it more difficult to understand once I was older and left me hurt that my mum had not been honest with me.

Knowing my dad was in prison was difficult as I did not have a lot of information about what life was like for him inside and I did not know whether he was safe. Looking back now, I know it would have put my mind at ease to have more understanding of my dad's daily agenda whilst in prison like what he was eating, what he could wear and the types of activities he could do.

I visited my dad in prison for the first time when I was ten. My mum's shame around my dad's imprisonment meant I wasn't allowed to tell other family members or friends that we were visiting. She was worried people wouldn't approve of me being taken into a prison and that they would make judgements about us based on my dad's situation. This made it harder for me because I was unable to express my anxiety or upset about visiting my dad to anyone.

I had always viewed prisons as daunting places where conflict often arose and so when I first visited, I was anxious about my mum and dad arguing or other people in prison.

I was also worried as I did not have a lot of information on how the visit would take place. The prison officers were friendly to me, but they did not explain much, I didn't even know I'd meet my dad in a big room with other families.

Once we had got through security and made it to the visiting room, I was excited to see my dad. For the first time in years, we got to talk a lot in person. There was also lots of activities for the kids, like toys and a play area, so my mum had a chance to talk to my dad too. However, the fact that you are inside a prison does not go away and it never felt quite the same as talking at home with my dad.

Leaving the prison was the hardest part because everyone is upset about being separated again. I was not sure when I would next be able to see my dad as my mum was not comfortable with taking us there often.

My frustration and distress at saying goodbye to my dad and going home without him stayed with me when I left the prison as I did not sleep well and began misbehaving at school.



I would have benefitted hugely from a charity like Sussex Prisoners' Families as a child because the suppression of my dad's imprisonment meant I did not cope well in social situations and took my stress out on others. I struggled at school as none of my teachers knew about my dad, so it was difficult for them to support me.

SPF encourage parents to be open with their children about when a loved one goes to prison, and they provide support for families coping with this.

I also feel that if my mum had been a part of a community like Sussex Prisoners' Families, that understood her experience and gave her an opportunity to discuss openly her worries, then it would have been easier for her to support me.

If you need support or advice on talking to your child about having a parent or family member in prison or would like help understanding the process, you can contact us by calling our

**First Stop helpline on
01273 499 843**

**Or email
info@sussexprisonersfamilies.org.uk**

