KIDS DAY AT RISDON PRISON

The little children are excited, if a little nervous. The older kids’ faces are quiet, but excitement shows in their eyes. They ignore the barb wire on the top of the massive grey fences and the large gates. Most of them have been here before.

It’s Kids Day at Risdon Prison and today these kids get to visit their mum in jail. I’m visiting the prison with Norm Reed, who is a Family engagement worker at Risdon Prison. Norm said the children’s visiting program at Risdon Prison was, according to the prisoners, the best thing the prison does.

The Kid’s Days are organised by Risdon Prison in conjunction the Christian Family Centre and volunteers recruited from individuals and organisations across Tasmania. Kid’s Days are held during the school holidays and are operating in each prison complex (4 events three times per year) for 2 hours. The focus is on the needs of the child and the creation of positive memories with their incarcerated parent. Days will usually have themes and involve the preparation of a meal.

Since the program started in 2011 there have been 75 Kids’ Day events and more than 3,500 children have had a special contact visit with their incarcerated parent.

It is important to remember that whilst the prisoners have forfeited some rights in the community, their children haven’t. Children have an entitlement to come and see their parents. The response from the prisoners is that this is the best thing the prison does.

28% of prisoners in Australia have children who depend on them for their basic needs. 21% of prisoners report that when they were children, their own parent had been imprisoned.¹

Kids Day is a chance for children and young people to visit their parent on their own, without their other parent or carers. When a prisoner’s spouse or partner comes to visit, the focus is often on adult matters and the children get left to play on their own. Many of these kids have been here on family visits, but going into a prison visit when it’s just the kids gives it a different focus.

When it’s just the kids and the parent, the kids get all the attention, they get to talk about what they want, and they get to interact with their parent, doing kid things. The kids, and the parents, love it.

Soon the last locked gate and security check is behind them. A group of excited mums waits eagerly and the children break into a run, rushing towards their mum. We hang back, allowing them privacy. Soon they all head to the activities room where they can do face-painting, games, read books, and catch up on all those other matters that can get neglected when the spouses or partners visit too.

Children and young people whose parent or parents were incarcerated had many challenges to face. Children and young people can be distressed and confused when a parent is arrested, particularly if it occurs in front of them; they lose contact with their parent and sometimes the extended family; and they can be bullied and ashamed at school.

It can be difficult to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent; they may have new caring responsibilities for siblings and remaining parents; physical and mental health issues; financial disadvantage; family conflict and divorce; and instability and homelessness.²

However research shows support for prisoners and their children can be provided at 3 critical times; at the arrest of the parent; throughout the period of imprisonment; and at reintegration into the home and community.

Norm tells me that promoting parent-child contact during imprisonment leads to improved outcomes for the children of imprisoned parents. He said it was extremely important to maintain family and community relationships for the prisoners as it helps them reintegrate into society when they are released. It also helps the children adjust to life at home without the parent, and when their parent returns.

Research also shows maintaining contact with one’s incarcerated parent appears to be one of the most effective ways to improve a child’s emotional response to incarceration, and reduce the incidence of problematic behaviour.³ It also helps the incarcerated parent, for example, by reducing recidivism rates.

As the Kids Day draws to a close, Norm takes a photo of each parent with their child or children. Each parent has a photo taken with her child or children. These photos are printed immediately and a copy given to each child to take home with the other things they have made with their mum. Even though prison is not a nice place, the aim is to create some positive memories for the kids and mums, which are then captured in the photos. They create good memories and the kids are not deprived of that.