



Child Impact Assessments for children with a parent in the justice system

Phase two report: dissemination and implementation

February 2023 to September 2024

Sarah Beresford

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane, and effective prison system. We aim to do this by reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime; improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families; and promoting equality and human rights.

prisonreformtrust.org.uk

We support people in prison through our Advice and Information Helpline and our information booklets and leaflets. We regularly engage with prison staff and other justice and community stakeholders (including police, judiciary, probation, women's centres, social work, health, education, voluntary sector organisations) to improve conditions for prisoners and their families, and we push for policy reform with government leads and other officials.

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Background to the project

Since 2018, PRT Associate Sarah Beresford has been leading our work on the impact of parental imprisonment on children. The briefing "[What about me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system](#)" shone a light on the systematic neglect of some of the UK's most vulnerable children¹:

There was just nothing; no one asked how we were doing or what support we needed. Nothing.

Layla, aged 10 when her mother first went to prison

Despite the requirement under Rule 7f of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment Of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules 2015)², there is no systematic recording and monitoring of children impacted by parental imprisonment. According to the 2024 Ministry of Justice: Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD), there were 192,912 children in England and Wales with a parent in between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022, but this is an estimate.³

The "What about me?" briefing recommended the use of Child Impact Assessments for children with a primary carer in the criminal justice system to ensure they are supported at the earliest opportunity. In July 2021, Sarah was awarded a [Churchill Fellowship Activate Award](#) to implement this recommendation, which culminated in phase one of the project: the development and publication, in December 2022, of the "[This is me](#)" toolkit.⁴

The toolkit and associated resources lay out how Child Impact Assessments can be used by a wide range of practitioners to ensure children with a parent in the justice system are listened to, supported, and involved in decision-making about that support:

It lets people know how I feel and gives me an opportunity to talk about my feelings in general around the situation.

Sam, aged 12

I really like the agreed action part... it tells me something has to come from this and it's not just another form, like maybe they can provide the right support.

Noori, aged 16

Phase one demonstrated that children welcome the [Child Impact Assessment framework](#), particularly its child-centred focus. Furthermore, it showed that listening to children, and including them in decision-making about them, can increase their resilience.

1 Beresford, S. (2018). *What About Me? The impact on children when mothers are involved in the criminal justice system*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/what-about-me.pdf>

2 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2016). The Nelson Mandela Rules: United Nations standard minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners. *International Legal Materials*. 55(6), pp.1180–1205.

3 Ministry of Justice. (2024). *Official statistics in development: Estimates of children with a parent in prison*. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison/official-statistics-in-development-estimates-of-children-with-a-parent-in-prison

4 Beresford, S. (2020). *"This is Me": A Child Impact Assessment toolkit*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/child-impact-assessment-toolkit/>

Summary of phase two activities

Generously funded by the Dulverton Trust and the Eleanor Rathbone Charitable Trust, phase two of the project was focused on disseminating information about, and implementing the use of, Child Impact Assessments. Over the course of the phase two, at least 130 children from all four UK nations used a Child Impact Assessment to identify their support needs at different stages of their parent's journey through the justice system. It is very difficult to provide precise numbers, as the Child Impact Assessment framework is freely available on PRT's website and can be accessed and used by a wide range of practitioners as well as by families themselves. The total number of children who have received support using the Child Impact Assessment framework is therefore likely to be higher than stated here.

Phase two of the project ran from February 2023 to September 2024. Project activities included, though were not limited to:

- Engaging in conversations about systemic change with policy leads in the Ministry of Justice and Department for Education (England and Wales), the Children's Commissioners of England, Wales and Scotland, and policy leads in the Scottish Government (within the Children and Families Directorate);
- Delivering awareness raising sessions about the Child Impact Assessment framework to over 350 practitioners from a wide range of sectors, including social work, education, police, judiciary, health, prison and probation staff, and specialist voluntary sector organisations;
- Providing bespoke training on how to use the Child Impact Assessment framework with children to over 60 practitioners from specialist organisations that deliver direct support to children and young people with a parent in the justice system;
- Supporting the Family Connections pilot project, a collaboration between the Maslow Foundation, Sussex Prisoners' Families, and the Kent, Surrey, and Sussex Probation Service, which aims to integrate Child Impact Assessments into pre-sentence reports for women in Kent, Surrey, and Sussex;
- Supporting a UNCRC-funded pilot project between Perth and Kinross local authority and Families Outside to implement the use of Child Impact Assessments at all stages of the justice system;
- Supporting practitioners from a wide range of sectors (specialist organisations that support families affected by imprisonment, education, health, social work, law, and justice) in their use of Child Impact Assessments with individual children;
- Facilitating the exploration of additional pilot projects throughout the UK (in Wales, Devon, Bristol, London, Dundee, Lancashire, and Cheshire);
- Supporting the Scottish Government in considering the role of Child Impact Assessments in supporting the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill;
- Adapting the Child Impact Assessment framework for children with a brother in the justice system as requested by several specialist organisations that support children impacted by the imprisonment of a family member (published at the beginning of phase three of the project as highlighted in this [blog](#));
- Supporting a PhD student in evaluating the impact on children of using the Child Impact Assessment framework;
- Updating the toolkit resources based on feedback from practitioners, including a [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document;
- Including links to the Child Impact Assessment framework in a range of publications and websites; and
- Liaising with international partners who are interested in adapting the Child Impact Assessment framework, including the Nanhe Kadam Creches in India and members of the Children of Prisoners Europe network.

The impact of phase two activities

The most important difference the work on Child Impact Assessments has made is to children and young people themselves:

This is so helpful. There's a lot of information in an easy to digest, easy to understand way and knowing that something can come from this is really helpful.

This has made things better for me. I was able to say how I felt and what I needed.

I liked speaking to my teacher about dad.

I drew a picture to show that I was sad about my mum being away.

This is a great tool, and it has definitely helped me! It is so important to educate people on this, as the feelings of the family are too often looked past.

Practitioners who have used the Child Impact Assessment framework with children have also provided positive feedback:

Thank you for the helpful information you sent. The Child Impact Assessment framework is really helpful in making recommendations to the court.

Social Worker

The "This is me" toolkit is an invaluable resource.

Teacher

As a Family Worker, supporting and advocating for children impacted by parental imprisonment, I have worked with and supported several children to access the Child Impact Assessment to explore their individual feelings, needs and areas of support needed to help them make sense of and navigate their experiences and trauma.

Family Worker

This toolkit provides reassurance to my staff that there is a resource that will help them support children more confidently and help with the direction of the support sessions. Or where we don't have capacity to support a child at that time, we have a resource that we can talk to professionals and parents about as a starting point.

Head of Family Support

The "This is Me" toolkit has helped shape and strengthen our person-centred approach when supporting children and young people by embedding the principles of the Child Impact Assessment into all aspects of our work to ensure we are truly giving children that safe space to say what they need at the right time.

Family Support Manager

This was a really helpful tool for me in supporting a 14-year-old boy whose mother is in prison. It is an area I knew very little about, and I found the accompanying notes really useful in giving me an understanding of how he might be feeling.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health practitioner

We are committed to ensuring that children's rights are realised and upheld. Going forward, we have developed our assessment process to include that a Child Impact Assessment is discussed with all new referrals we receive for children and young people.

Family Support Manager

I regularly deliver training to professionals in social services, schools and other support agencies on how to support children affected by imprisonment. I always ask professionals to consider using the Child Impact Assessment as their first step in planning support for the child or young person. It's an accessible way for professionals to ensure the child's voice is heard and that any support offered is in direct response to what the child feels they need.
Quality and Development Manager

A key part of the training we deliver is communicating the unique experience of each child, the ways they will be impacted and how their needs may change as their parent progresses through the criminal justice system. The Child Impact Assessment prompts professionals to revisit decisions with the child at each stage and reassess their support needs.
Children and Young People Manager

It is imperative that children have their voices heard and their views respected. The child impact assessment allows this important task to be carried out in a sensitive and timely manner.
Children and Young People Coordinator

Phase two activities have inspired several blogs which demonstrate the impact on individual children and their families and make the case for policy reform:

- [Steph's story](#)
- [Family Connections](#)
- [How we're making sure children are seen and heard](#)

In three known cases, the Child Impact Assessment framework has led to an alternative to custody for women who were expected to receive a custodial sentence. As the judge in one of the cases commented, "The Child Impact Assessment was very useful in applying the caring mitigation." All three cases were within phase two pilot projects so were shared with PRT; it is possible that there are further examples of Child Impact Assessments being helpful in encouraging viable alternatives to custody.

Lessons learned from phase two

The work on Child Impact Assessments has learning at its heart. Throughout phase two, challenges were actively identified, and solutions were sought based on research findings and feedback from key stakeholders. The learning from phase two of the project includes:

- Children with a parent in the justice system are a hidden population, and families can be reluctant to ask for, and accept, support. Many families have low levels of trust in statutory services. Specialist voluntary sector organisations that support families affected by imprisonment are key to disseminating the Child Impact Assessment framework within their own networks. Several specialist organisations have integrated the framework into their routine offer of support for children.
- Embedding the use of the Child Impact Assessment framework is slow. Conversations about potential pilot projects have not developed as quickly as had been expected, but the vision to progress this work remains. Several organisations and partnership groups have made a commitment to using the framework with children in ongoing work, rather than as part of a formal pilot project.

- Stakeholders (policy leads and practitioners) have limited time to digest information sent in emails. Engaging with people in person or online makes a significant difference to people's understanding of what the framework is and how to use it. Based on feedback from stakeholders, a [summary information web page](#) has been created, which includes a brief overview of the framework and links to the most relevant resources. The aforementioned [Frequently Asked Questions](#) document has also been helpful in clarifying how Child Impact Assessments can work in practice.
- It is impossible to know exactly how many children have accessed the Child Impact Assessment framework. A key strength of the project is that [resources](#) are free to use and available on PRT's website. This means, however, that the precise number of children who have used a Child Impact Assessment cannot be tracked. Options are being considered of how to monitor its use in ways that are not onerous for stakeholders but nonetheless provide useful information for the next stage of the project.
- There has not yet been a formal evaluation of the difference the Child Impact Assessment makes to children; feedback from children, parents, practitioners, and policy leads thus far remains ad hoc. Two pilot projects have integrated formal academic evaluation into their activities: the Maslow Foundation Family Connections project now has a PhD student attached who will consider the UK-wide impact of Child Impact Assessments, and the Perth and Kinross pilot includes a Master's student whose dissertation will summarise the impact of that project.
- Families do not like the term 'assessment', and this has been a barrier to some children accessing the framework. PRT Associate Sarah Beresford is working closely with key stakeholders to address this and has collaborated with one of the pilot projects to produce an easy-read leaflet for families which explains what the framework is without using the word 'assessment'. The project will provide feedback on how effective this is, and Sarah will share the resource and feedback with other partners. Furthermore, Sarah has adapted training sessions to include reflections on ways of approaching families sensitively to encourage participation. Interestingly, some practitioners who work with families report that the term 'assessment' can be helpful, for example when integrating a Child Impact Assessment within a pre-sentence report. The flexibility of the framework allows for variation of language used with families and practitioners, depending on the context.

Next steps

The work to date on the use of Child Impact Assessments to support children with a parent in the justice system shines a light on the huge complexities involved and the reality that there is no 'quick fix'. A whole system, multi-agency approach rooted in children's rights is needed. The work to date demonstrates that effective leadership is key to bringing stakeholders together to find creative, collective solutions.

PRT is committed to supporting phase three of this work from October 2024 to December 2025. Phase three, funded by the Dulverton Trust, is well underway and is considering what systemic change is needed to ensure children are offered the right support at all stages of a parent's journey through the justice system and how Child Impact Assessments can support policy and practice. To this end, the Firebird Foundation is generously funding an event in May 2025 which will bring together a wide range of stakeholders to explore why a child's rights approach is integral to policy and practice relating to children and young people affected by imprisonment, how this can be achieved, and the role that Child Impact Assessments can play in supporting this.

Led by children and young people with lived experience, the nature of the work on Child Impact Assessments is iterative and evolving, based always on the vision and expertise of young people themselves. It is therefore not possible to predict the direction of travel in detail, but it is hoped this work will continue into phase four: pushing for evidence-based policy reform and embedding the Child Impact Assessment framework into existing processes. It is hoped that the small-scale pilot projects from phases two and three will be scaled up in future phases.

Acknowledgements

Phase two of this project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Dulverton Trust and the Eleanor Rathbone Charitable Trust, and PRT is extremely grateful to the Trustees of both charities for sharing our vision for change. We are also extremely grateful to all of the organisations who have engaged with the Child Impact Assessment within phase two activities and the staff, both policymakers and practitioners, who have provided insightful feedback. As ever, it is the children and young people themselves who are integral to this work; their passion for change, and their commitment to drawing on their own experiences in order to improve the wellbeing of others, is inspiring.

I invite anyone who might come across a child who is impacted by the criminal justice system to talk to us! Ask us what we want and need. We want to be included in decisions that affect us. We can no longer be ignored.

Young person whose father was in prison

