

# Left in Limbo

**The experience of prisoners' children**

*in collaboration with*

**Tar Anall**

*compiled by*

**Michael Hall**

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Those discussions were co-ordinated by Róisín Kelly,  
Training and Education Resource Worker, Tar Anall.

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# Introduction

*Tar Anall* is a self-help organisation, set up in 1995 to provide support to Republican prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. Among its numerous advisory, advocacy, training and resettlement activities are two projects providing opportunities for children of prisoners, or children who have been bereaved because of the conflict, to come together. *Óganaigh le Chéile* is a Peer Education programme for 14-19 year olds, which began in 1998. Trainees on this programme have gained accreditation in alcohol and drug awareness, facilitation skills, listening/befriending skills, first aid, health and sexuality, and child protection issues. *Clár na nÓg* is designed specifically for 10-14 year olds. Trainees engage in personal development training, group work activities, drama, and discussion on issues such as alcohol and drug awareness, as well as health and sexuality.

Within both these groups of young people discussion often focuses on the impact imprisonment and loss has had upon them, at both an individual and a family level. During the discussions the whole spectrum of emotions and responses are often recounted – from negative feelings of fear, anger, withdrawal and resignation, to more positive ones of hope, fortitude and resilience. Above all, it is evident that the sharing of such feelings has therapeutic value for the young people involved.

The young people find it especially important when their feelings are shared with the wider adult community. To this end, an important step forward took place in March 2000 when young people from *Óganaigh le Chéile* visited Long Kesh and made a presentation to Republican prisoners there. Prisoners and young people both acknowledged it to have been a thought-provoking and stimulating exchange.

Róisín Kelly, *Tar Anall*'s Training and Education Resource Worker with responsibility for both these projects, responding to the desire of the young people to make their experiences available to other young people facing similar circumstances, felt that the *Community Think Tanks* format might provide a platform whereby this could be achieved. Accordingly, a number of discussion evenings were held with some of the young people, culminating a few weeks before all remaining Republican and Loyalist prisoners received early release under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

*Michael Hall, Community Think Tanks Co-Ordinator*

# Left in Limbo

## Acknowledging a problem

The desire among the young people to share their experiences, feelings and emotions with others had undoubtedly been greatly enhanced by the presentation they made to the prisoners in Long Kesh and the positive response of the prisoners.

That day up at the jail was good, it was good for everyone, them and us. We got round to talking about how we felt whenever our daddies come home from jail... we talked about how it affects us, and it gave them an insight into our feelings. It let them know that when they get out of jail they should try harder to see things from our viewpoint.

I believe that was a learning experience for the prisoners, 'cause they think it's okay that they're coming out and everything's going to be fine and all the rest of it. We said that the prisoners don't have enough understanding of where we're coming from, that things should be talked about, how *we* feel about it. Now, we're not saying that there's *always* bound to be problems. What we're saying is that we need to have opportunities for everyone, prisoners and their families, to look at all the issues around imprisonment, to assist families to relate to each other better.

The whole purpose was to explore the effects of imprisonment on children and young people, 'cause all the issues around that are only starting to come out now. But they need to be talked about, they need to be brought out into the open.

That's what we were about, trying to make them aware that when they come out everything's not necessarily going to be alright, and that there's not going to be a big party, they're not going to get the red carpet treatment for the rest of their lives.

Although a growing number of ex-prisoners also feel, like the young people, that reintegration issues "are only starting to come out now", some of the points

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*Note: All indented paragraphs represent a quote, and spaces between quotes indicate when a new contributor is speaking. In line with Think Tank procedure, no quote is attributed, a policy which experience has shown allows for more openness.*

made by the young people might have been difficult for some prisoners to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the prisoners were very receptive to what the young people had to say. As one of the young people noted:

They were asking us what they could do to make it better.

Greatly encouraged by the prisoners' response, and feeling that the exercise had been very worthwhile, the young people now wanted to explore and express the same views through a booklet which could be made available to other children and young people who might be going through similar situations or experiencing similar feelings and anxieties.

I think it's important that we have our say about what our experiences have been. Whatever we put in this booklet could have an impact on other young people who read it. This booklet should be about us putting together stuff that we have all talked about, like that day in the jail.

There's all these youth conferences where some adults mention prisoners' children, ex-prisoners' children, but they haven't actually consulted us. And they've assumed things, they've never actually come to us and said, "Have you done this research, what about your work with young people, what are they saying?" And then when they find out that we *have* done this kind of work, they say, "Oh, we didn't know that; but, anyway, this is what *we* think about it." So this is *our* opportunity to say how it really is. 'Cause they're writing publications and research and stuff and they've never talked to us about it.

It should be about how it affects us whenever a father gets out of jail. How it affects us whenever he goes away, and whenever he gets out. We're leading our own lives for years and he's going to try and get back in with us... in with the family again, and try and come back into a leading role, and take over.

Tar Anall's Training and Education Resource worker concurred with the young people's assessment of the value of such a booklet.

What we're trying to do is to say: if there's another youngster out there who is having problems when their father or mother returns from jail, they will not be on their own, they will lift this booklet and go –hey, I'm not the only one who felt that way! It's not a remedy for the problems as such, it's just a reassurance for them to know that they're not on their own. And it's the same for dead volunteers' children; there's never been any work done with these children, and I'm talking from experience. And it's an opportunity to say: did it have an effect on you in any way? What was it? Was it hard to cope with? Did you get upset? Did you think you shouldn't be thinking things like that? How did you cope with what was happening to you?

I think now's the best time to do it, 'cause most of the prisoners are getting out now, and the kids are going to start experiencing lots now when their daddy's back in the house.

The whole point of it is to pass on any information we have which would be relevant to others.

## **The trauma of the Troubles**

Those children whose parents were either arrested or imprisoned as a result of the ongoing conflict did not experience that conflict as something distant and remote from them, but as a reality which intruded heavily into their lives, often with abrupt and traumatic impact.

Sometimes the peelers used to come and wreck your house and we would get upset; they used to wreck your room.

It was frightening. If you didn't get a chance to open the door they just smashed it through or something.

Yeah, they didn't even rap the doors, they just broke in.

For me it was more annoying than frightening, 'cause they usually done it at five o'clock in the morning when you're asleep and lying comfortable.

I thought it was good sometimes 'cause I got let off school. My daddy wouldn't let them into our room but they came in anyway. They wouldn't let us sit and watch TV.

Yet *they* would! We used to have tapes of the news, and they would sit and watch every single one of them; they would be there for hours.

We had to sit in the living room, and say nothing, you weren't allowed to talk to them. Our parents had warned us. The soldiers tried to ask you what your name was, and you weren't allowed to look at their guns either.

Once I had to stand outside in my shorts freezing while they searched my sister's car.

They were in our house for a few hours and they were wrecking it and couldn't find anything so they brought in these men in blue suits and they drilled into the wall.

They put a drill right through our walls too and left big holes in them. They'd rip up your floorboards, take your clothes, wreck your cupboards and wardrobe.

They give you a form to fill in if anything is broken or missing, but they never get in touch with you again. It was a waste of time. And you're left trying to find the money to do your house up again.

They used to rip our mattresses up, and they broke our TV – saying we could be hiding stuff in there.

Nor did the arrest of a parent put an end to such visits.

They ripped up our floorboards, and ripped up the carpets, and they didn't care if they broke anything. And my dad was already in jail at this time; they just kept coming back.

Same with us: even when my daddy got out they raided the house and said they were looking for guns an' all; they put more holes in the walls an' all.

The last time they done our house it wasn't even to do with my mother, it was because of her brothers, it was done for badness.

All your aunties used to come over and help you; the full street used to riot afterwards just because the peelers raided your house.

We got back at them sometimes. One time there was a riot and the peelers came in and someone threw a firework into their jeep. Then after that shooting started, and someone came along and threw a petrol bomb into a jeep.

Subsequent to such houses searches most children were left with a real feeling that their whole family was now under the scrutiny of the security forces.

They know who you are an' all, the foot patrols would say, "How are you, Mr F\_\_\_\_, how are you today?"

See whenever the peelers found out who you were, they used to stop you and check your car and torture you and make you get out of your car, and follow you.

It has calmed down quite a lot since the ceasefire. They would still stop you the odd time, though; a few weeks ago they flew down in the jeep and pumped the horn at us.

## The stresses of daily survival

For some children, the arrest of a parent often meant a complete disruption of normal family life.

Some people are lucky enough to have a lot of family around them, but whenever my daddy went into jail my mummy's family – near enough all of them – moved to England. My daddy's family would have took my brother and my sister at times, but apart from them she never got much help from anyone –yet she coped.

My mummy coped too, but we always seemed to be short of money.

I know now how difficult it was for her, having to look after our whole family by herself.

You missed out on holidays because your mummy never had enough money.

Some children were not fully aware of money shortages and lack of everyday luxuries, mainly because their mothers bore most of the hardship.

None of us ever done without anything, 'cause mummy always done without and whenever you're growing up you're selfish and you don't care – as long as you get what you want it doesn't matter about anyone else. It was only when we got older that we realised just what she had done without.

My da told me when he went in “to make sure you help your ma”, so I helped out.

One girl, whose father was killed in the conflict and whose mother eventually married again, drew a comparison between the frugal lifestyle she and her mother experienced then and that experienced by her half-brother and half-sister today.

I knew it was hard for my mummy. It must have been hard then. But see now, my wee brother and sister's daddy was in jail and now he's out and see the money that they get? The money they got for their clothes at Easter was double what we ever got.

For some children the constant and difficult struggle to make ends meet engendered a deep resentment towards the absent parent.



We always needed money, because my ma had nothing. We had a business when my da got put in jail; we had to close down the shop, we were left in debt, with no money. We always had to do without, and I never had any money of my own.

An obvious drain on the family budget was the making up of parcels of food and clothing for the imprisoned parent, an added stress which some prisoners were fully aware of, others less so.

My daddy would always run [the equivalent of] six miles a day and he would go through pair after pair of gutties, and my mummy could always tell when he needed new gutties. So she would get them out of the catalogue, although he wouldn't ask for them himself. He would send out word to my granny and say, "I need such and such." It was his mummy had to buy him things! She didn't mind, though. And whenever she sent him in money he would send it out to us. My daddy never asked us for anything.

Parole always had a big effect on our money. It was great while it lasted, but see when he went back in, you'd no money until your mummy had paid off what she'd borrowed for the paroles! It wasn't that he was demanding you to make these paroles really memorable when he got out, you just didn't want him to get out to nothing and be just sitting there.

Parole was a difficult time for some children, and not just for financial reasons.

I hated paroles. I used to go and sit anywhere except in our house, 'cause everybody always came to our house and we were just brushed aside. It was always a case of, "I'll see you later, see you later." And then he would go out with his mates and come in snattered – and I hated that.

Others recall it more fondly.

Whenever my daddy got out on parole they had a party for him because my mummy knew that that's what would happen, that people would be calling and calling. And that's why we had a party, so that people could all see him at the one time, and everybody had a chance. But after the party we used to go away for the day with him, stay overnight somewhere. And there was one night we sat up in my aunt's so that my mummy and daddy could go out for their dinner and have the house to themselves – but we never got brushed aside, my daddy was doting over us. He threw money at us left, right and centre – mummy's money! We used to get £5 for sweets, it was class!

Prison visits too were difficult and stressful occasions.

There were some times we went up to the prison and they told us we weren't getting in, but yet they had let us sit there for hours.

One time my granny wouldn't let them search me 'cause I was so young and my aunt had to come up and collect me for they wouldn't let me in.

With both my parents in an English jail I didn't get to see them that often. And it was very expensive to go over there. I know some families went all the way to the jail only to find that the prisoners had been moved to another jail. Our family life was really messed about a lot.

Too much time was spent in the waiting rooms. It took about four hours; I used to go and visit all my uncles when I was there with my mummy.

And during visits my mummy wouldn't say to my daddy that it was difficult at home, trying to cope with everything. What could he do about those problems, anyway?

Whatever the individual circumstances, there were few, if any, children, who did not suffer in some way.

With both my parents in jail it was hard, because you lived with different relatives. We always seemed to be moving. You were always asking them questions about why our parents were in jail. On birthdays we felt really sad that our parents could never be there. When my mummy got out we had no house at that time and she had to start looking from scratch.

With my daddy in jail there was less money, and not very much pocket money. Mummy was hard on you because you always asked for money and she didn't have it. You weren't allowed to stay out late because your mummy was too overprotective.

What I hated most was not being able to do what other children did with their daddies –like playing football and going places –you felt left out and lonely.

Or being bullied in school and you didn't wanna go and tell your mummy because you didn't want to give her any more hassle, so you kept it to yourself. Or getting beat up and knowing your daddy won't be round at their doors.

It was hard, like, 'cause there were five of us. But I had loads of family and all. The only thing is, I wasn't born when my daddy was killed, and I never got to say 'Daddy', ever . . . I never ever got to say it.

## Understanding

What understanding did the young people have as to what had happened to their parent(s)?

My mummy told me that the peelers had lifted the wrong man.

I felt okay not knowing everything at the time; my mummy said I would be told when I was older.

When my daddy was arrested I was told he would be back in an hour. But then I got told a week later that my daddy had got put in jail.

When I [eventually] got told the whole truth I felt sad because the whole time I had been kept in the dark about what really happened.

When I was about four the peelers came to the door and took my ma. They left her back later and said it was the wrong person.

I was awake and saw them go into the jeep. He was away to jail but I was told he was away to the dentist, and [when he didn't come back] I was told that he was working in Newcastle.

Most children retain vivid memories of the home circumstances at the time of their parent's arrest.

I was nine, I was in the bath. Mummy had told me earlier [in the day] that she had heard that there was somebody lifted in England, but she couldn't see the news all day. After my bath I dandered down the stairs and she was only off the phone. And she said, "Sit down for a minute, your da's in jail, your da got lifted." And we all sat there with our heads down and I remember getting hugged.

I remember being in the house and H\_\_\_\_\_ coming to the front door and taking my mummy into the kitchen. I remember my mummy being a bit distant from a few days beforehand and she had said to me that somebody had been arrested but she didn't know who it was. Then when she was told it was him, my mummy and my sister were in tears. And mummy put her arm around me and I was just sitting there. And mummy said, "Do you not want to cry?" And I said, "No". To be honest, it never really registered on me, because my daddy only came every now and again; he was never really in our house.

I was eight but I can't remember exactly what I was doing 'cause he was lifted three times. When I went into the room my mummy was crying for ages and she said, "Your daddy is away to jail." She wouldn't tell me why, but I heard my relatives all talking about it.

There was a video-tape of my da, where the peelers were watching him where he was staying in Scotland; they had the video camera on this house they were in. And one day they locked themselves out, and my da had to climb through the windie, and it was all on video!

Given that the majority of the children had lived in communities which would have been largely sympathetic to, if not fully supportive of, the Republican cause, it is curious that some parents felt it necessary to concoct elaborate stories distancing the circumstances of their partner's imprisonment from anything connected with the political situation.

Until I was about eight I didn't know, but I remember saying to my mummy, "Why's my daddy in jail?" She stopped the car and looked at me. And I asked her again. I remember she told me two different stories and it clicked later with me that she must have been spoofing. The first time she told me that he fell asleep outside Crumlin Road jail and they took him in 'cause they felt sorry for him! And I said to her, "Could you not say to them that you're his wife and you're going to bring him home and they don't need to feel sorry for him?" And she said he was caught stealing milk from someone's front garden. So I believed that until I was about nine – I must have been a very gullible child.

You wouldn't say to a child that your daddy killed someone. On a visit they would talk about things and you would sometimes hear them saying things, that someone did something that others thought was wrong. But she never came out and told you specifically what he had done.

The Tar Anall worker concurred that this was indeed the situation.

What's interesting is that, especially with the younger ones, none of them were actually told what went on. In fact, one of them was told that her mother had a row in a disco, and she believed that throughout all the years her mother was in jail. And when you look back on it now, you think it's terribly sad, because she was convinced in her head that if she went to a disco she would end up in jail. And I think it's good to be told and helped to understand it, 'cause you can see the effects of it now on that wee girl, years later. She always thought: if I get into a row with this crowd I'm going to end up doing five years in jail. I don't think people realise the damage what they might be doing sometimes when they're not being honest.

And, apart from the actual circumstances of their parent's arrest and imprisonment,

what did they know about –and what did they *feel* about –the reasons behind their parent’s involvement in the ongoing conflict?

I never knew what he really died for until I was about fourteen. I thought he just got killed for nothing but I know now he didn’t, he got killed for Ireland. As far as I am concerned, he did what everyone else was doing at the time. I think it is important that you should know. I just thought all those years that he was just shot for nothing, and that he wasn’t in anything, so I was, like: the Brits killed my da for nothing. Now, I know he died for a reason, he was fighting for something he believed in.

I looked at it: why should we suffer for their beliefs? Since I was seven I have had to travel to England, Wales and Scotland – all over – just to see him, for like twice a year, maybe three days there, then the whole way back again. And it was a big hassle, a big strain on my mummy, a big strain on us, me and my sister. And I was just raging, like: why should we have to put up with this crap ’cause of what he done and his beliefs – and I didn’t think it was right.

I don’t think I have ever felt like that. When we were being brought up, it wasn’t really talked about, ’cause I suppose you don’t tell young children why their daddy’s in jail. But it’s all in your upbringing; if you know about what’s going on in society then you have a fair idea. Then as you get older you start talking about it, and then you realise. My mummy always says that she and my daddy wanted better lives for us than they had, and I thought fair play to him, for he did it so that the next generation could attempt to have a better life. And because I was only two when my daddy went to jail it never bothered me that he was in jail – ’cause it was just a case of: I’m going up to see this wee man now, and that was it. But I was never angry at him because of it, for at the end of the day you can’t stop having beliefs just for the sake of other people, you can’t stop believing in things.

My mother was Republican as well, and she always supported my da, but I wouldn’t accept it, it would still... it disgusts me, to be honest.

I don’t think that as children we fully understood why our mummies and daddies got involved the way they did; we didn’t experience the same things that they did growing up, and I don’t really think that we know what happened to them half of the times, which made them want to get involved.

I think there’s more communication between parents and children now than there would have been then.

I grew up in Dundalk so I was never in Belfast to experience anything at all like what was going on there, so I had no idea until I came up here.

And in Dundalk there's a lot of IRA, although they weren't always liked by some people there. Now, I didn't grow up thinking like that myself, but as things went on and on and I came up here and everybody was always on about the Hoods and the Provies and all that. And I just said to myself: my daddy went off to do such and such, to bomb Britain or whatever, and he just left us, and I think that's when I cracked up.

In the aftermath of a parent's imprisonment, the remaining parent, especially if their partner had received a long sentence, had either to be resolved to wait for the absent partner's return or get on with making an entirely new life.

My mummy, through whatever course of events, got involved with somebody else, and there's a lot of people would have said: you didn't stick by your man, and such and such. And my mummy would have said, "He's made his decision and I told him I was going to go on with my life if he got put in jail." And she did, and I say fair play to her. But there's still a lot of people out there who wouldn't think like that.

All of my friends say to me, "How long's your daddy been in jail?" And I say, "About fifteen years." And they say, "Your mummy never had another boyfriend the whole time?" "No, none." It just never happened and I said, "Why should she have?" 'Cause I thought it was normal. And they said, "I don't know how she did it; I think I would have just moved on." I don't know why she didn't either but that's the way it was.

The Tar Anall Education Worker acknowledged her own painful recollections:

When my brother was killed I hadn't been told and I remember thinking, when he didn't come home, that he'd just been arrested again. He had been arrested during the Supergrass trials, so I thought he would be just the usual seven days away from home. But when I asked my sister when he'd be coming home, she turned to me and told me that he wasn't coming back. I was devastated – he was my only brother – and to this day I can clearly remember the very spot where I was standing when she told me. That was thirteen years ago and it's still very difficult trying to work it all out. I don't think I'll ever come to terms with the loss. It had been bad enough when he'd been away for seven days, but when the days became years . . . My niece was born two weeks after my brother – her daddy – was killed and I'm always curious as to how she feels and thinks about him. She has his photograph and she hears all the stories about him, but I often wonder is she thinking, "I wish he was here." I shouldn't expect that of her, but it's sad watching them all grow up knowing he's not there to share their lives.

## Homecoming

Some of the young people in the group were still awaiting the release of their imprisoned fathers, and were looking forward to the homecoming with an understandable mixture of excitement and unease.

I worry that it's going to be different in our house. There's going to be an extra person, and he's going to be trying to take over. But I don't mind, we get on alright on visits. Though I am a lot older than he seems to accept, and he might have a lot of rules for me.

Such trepidation is understandable, especially if the young people had been aware of the situation as it had affected friends who had already experienced that homecoming.

I hated him at that time. Because when he came back he started to tell us what to do, and I wasn't used to it. I was thirteen and I just went out and went nuts, 'cause I wasn't going to let him tell me what to do.

I felt the same at first when my daddy got out of jail –although me and my daddy have actually started to build a good relationship now. But it was dead strange, 'cause whenever he first got out and I wanted to go out anywhere I had to stay in my friend's house 'cause me and mummy could not tell him I was going out. I had to be very secretive about everything, and I didn't like doing that, 'cause I don't like the thought of not letting other people know where I am. But he just wouldn't let me do anything, and I didn't like it 'cause my sister was eighteen whenever he got out and my brother was twenty-one, so he couldn't say anything to them, but I was under eighteen. And I thought: I can't wait until I'm eighteen then I can do whatever I want! And because he wouldn't let me do anything, there was more fights than enough between me and him than between anybody else. 'Cause I just went: well, he's not really my daddy 'cause he wasn't there for all those years, and he expects just to walk back in! But I'm sure he felt the same way: like, he was probably saying, "I don't know what to do with her!" ... and trying to get along with me. But I wasn't having any of it. I just went: no, I don't like him and that's it! But now it's all starting to change – but it takes time, so it does.

A common point of tension certainly centred around the ex-prisoner's inability to accept that his 'wee girl' who had been an infant when he was imprisoned was now a growing adolescent, if not already a young woman, and that his 'wee boy' was now a young man wanting to assert himself with the same freedoms as others in his peer group.

My daddy would still treat me as if I was pretty young and ask, “What’re you doing, where’re you going, who’re you seeing?” And I just laugh at him and say, “Look, da, I’m eighteen now, you can’t do anything about it!” And mummy would also be saying to him, “She’s right, she’s eighteen now, you can’t do that now.” And although he laughs at it, I know it annoys him a bit. At times he treats me as if I was about eight, but then again I’m the youngest in our family, and I suppose he’s just being very overprotective. The rest of them are all well grown up and because I’m the youngest he probably thinks: I can tell her what to do and be a proper daddy to her. But we fought about it all the time at first. I even remember saying, “No, I don’t want you to be here; go away, go back to jail and come back in a couple of years’ time! Either that or I’ll move out or something!”

My da isn’t out yet, but I know it’s going to be different from this ’cause I’m the youngest in our house and whenever my da went in the oldest would have been about eighteen, so he’s already went through all that there, he knows I’m going to have to start taking responsibility for myself.

My daddy got out in December and he tried to dictate to me on his third day out. It didn’t work, like, ’cause I didn’t listen to him, but that started us off, we didn’t really speak then, I wouldn’t speak to him for ages. Then he tried to get me under his thumb, saying, “You’re not going out till such and such a time, and you have to come in at such and such a time to study, and do such and such,” –but I wouldn’t listen to him. Then it brought my mummy into it and she would be put in the middle between me and him and she wouldn’t know what way to cope with it. It’s starting to get a bit better but it’s still awkward, ’cause I wouldn’t even really look on him as a father, like, I would look at him the same as someone I would go and stay with every now and then.

Whenever they went in we were kids; when they’re coming back out they’re thinking we’re going to be the same as we were, that things are going to be the same as it was then. But it’s not, we’re older now and have got our own lives.

It’s not that we don’t want our parents there, we just want them to understand that we’re older now, we have got common sense. My daddy would still say, “Now, you be careful going to such and such a place.” Like even crossing the road my daddy tells me to be careful – as if I haven’t the sense to cross the road properly! He does! There was one time whenever he first got out he tried to hold my hand crossing the road, and I was thinking: what’re are you doing, get away from me! He says, “Just watch yourself crossing that road.” And I says, “I can fucking cross



the road without anyone holding my hand!” They do stupid things, they don’t realise you have the sense to know what you’re doing.

Or going into the town. He’ll still try to tell me, “Now, don’t be in the town past 8 o’clock, and when it starts to get dark, come back.”

I think it was because they wanted to make up for time they had lost, but as was said before, they didn’t realise, or they couldn’t accept, how old we were when they got out.

Not only were there times when this age difference caused untold problems, but the renewed relationship with the other parent often overturned long-established patterns in the home, and this was a situation some young people found hard to cope with.

We used to hate it, ’cause my sister was always used sleeping with my ma, for four years, every night, and my da came back and she still tried to get into the bed, even if it was at the bottom.

That’s what I hated, even to this day. See my mummy and daddy – he’s been out now over two years –but they still giggle and giggle and tell each other jokes when they’re lying in bed. And our walls are paper-thin. And see when he first got out and you heard the giggling going on I used to kick the bottom of the bed – I near broke it – ’cause I was going: that’s my bed he’s sleeping in! But it’s not, it’s his bed. I cracked up and started fights with my mummy and with my sister, ’cause I was so annoyed.

Often any attempt at communication would meet with resistance, even resentment on the part of the young people.

It gets on my nerves when he starts going on about the old days and the boys in the jail and all, it really gets on my wick. I am very resentful towards him and towards the ‘RA’ and all that there, ’cause I feel like: we’re his family, why did he go off and do such and such, we should have come first, not his... his belief or whatever.

Well, I can talk to my da, but there’s certain things you can’t tell him, in case he says: my son’s a headcase for hanging about with that crowd.

My da has never talked to me about what he was doing before he went to jail. And I don’t want him to. He doesn’t know my life and I’d rather not know his.

Mine hasn’t told me either. I’ve never asked him about it, it’s just never come up. And I don’t want to ask him about it.

## Advice

The young people acknowledged that much of the misunderstandings and strained relationships were the product of confusion over roles. Not only were the young people confused as to how to treat the returned parent, but the ex-prisoner, especially in the case of fathers, was bound to feel confused as to how he should relate not only to his children but to his wife. His wife has had to look after the household unaided all those years and now, suddenly, he's home again. He often feels obliged to reassert whatever role he held prior to his imprisonment, but this can frequently pose a threat to the role that his wife, through necessity, had grown accustomed to. As for the children, they are often left stranded in the middle. They can find themselves asking: do I support my father or do I support my mother; will my mother support me against my father or will she take his side? And when questions arise as to when the children should be allowed to go out, the returned ex-prisoner forgets that for all his absent years he had not been the father, he had no say at all in such matters, and a resentment can build up against his dictates, no matter how well-intentioned they might be.

The young people all agreed that what was needed was dialogue and communication. Accordingly, they were asked what advice they would give to a returning, or a returned, parent.

Don't be jumping in straight away, don't try and act the da straight away, 'cause your children will not listen to you. They will just look at you and say, "Don't you be thinking you can tell me what to do!"

I don't think you can give advice to one side of this without the other. I think you'd need to say to the child that there is going to be problems, and no matter how much people say to them, "I've been through this, so don't be doing this and that," there's still going to be difficulties because everybody's different. Just tell them that while it doesn't seem like it now, in a couple of years youse'll actually grow to be friends. But for the time being don't be jumping down your parent's throat every time they do something, even if they do something that really annoys you. Laugh at them and say they haven't a clue what they're doing, and talk to them, don't just be cutting off. And the same with the parent coming out. I would say to them, "Look, every time you feel you're going to have to put restrictions or whatever on your children, stop and look at them, and ask yourself: what age are they, what was I doing at that age?" Okay, you're not going to let them go mad. I know my daddy doesn't want me to drink, so I said to him the other day, "What age were you when you

started drinking?” And he said, “I was twenty-one.” So I said, “Seriously, what age were you?” And he said, “Okay, I was about fifteen or sixteen.” And I said, “Well there, I wasn’t doing it when I was fifteen, but I want to do it now when it’s legal, and I’m not going to rip the arse out of it.” There has to be compromises on both sides, it’s not just a one-way thing.

I think that the father, or mother, would need to be the child’s friend first, sit down and talk with them, not shout and carry on about what they think you’re doing. They should talk to whatever parent has been there at home all the time and find out from them what the children have been allowed to do and what they’re not allowed to do, and what the other parent thinks about what they can or can’t do now.

Play second-fiddle to your wife for the first few months, because she is the one who has been coping with the children all the years.

And if she’s been doing a good job up to then, why should you try and change it? Watch and learn.

It’s probably best for both sides to try and empathise with each other, to give each other support. To try and put yourself in the parent’s position, and the same for the parent – try and think what you were doing at your child’s age and in their situation. You should try and say: well, they’re got such and such hassles going on at the minute, I should try and compromise with them over certain things.

They should get a job for a start! ’Cause mostly they do nothing, ’cause they’ve been used doing nothing.

I think they have a hard time in certain respects, in regard to the money and trying to work out its value and trying to find work.

It’s not just the families which have changed, the whole of society has changed.

And fashions change as well. I remember someone telling me that ones on the blanket were wearing bell-bottoms at the time, and whenever they came off the blanket they said, “Send us in some clothes.” And when they were sent up jeans they said, “Do you expect me to wear these, get me a pair of bell-bottoms!”

I think that’s why they misunderstand the age of the children, because a whole chunk of time has been taken out of their lives.

## The present environment

And what of the current everyday reality for the young people? For a start, did being the children of prisoners create any differentiation between them and their friends?

The odd time it did. When we were younger they'd be saying, "Say nothing in front of them ones, their family's all 'RA'."

There's also been a lot of perks, 'cause we've got involved in things we wouldn't have got the chance to get involved in – getting taken away on trips and things like that . . .

See when I was younger, and you had to go up to the shop – and there had to be five or six of you otherwise your mummy wouldn't let you go up to the shop, even though it was only across the road. And when I wasn't there all the older ones used to beat the crap out of the smaller ones, but see if I was with them, it was, "Her da's a Provie", and we're going to ourselves: what's a Provie? We didn't know, but it was good that you didn't get beat up and your mates didn't get beat up. But then see whenever I started school, there was a girl got threw out of our school, I hadn't seen her in months, but she turned round and said to a friend of mine, "Tell such and such I said 'Hi', and tell such and such 'Hi', but tell M\_\_\_\_\_ her daddy's nothing but a murderer." I had never done anything on her for her to come out and say this, and it really really annoyed me. Because I did nothing on her, and my daddy didn't do anything on her, so why should she say it? But it upset me and there's a stigma on it as well.

Any public display of being treated differently can create its own difficulties.

I remember a prisoner's son stole a car – this wasn't in Belfast – drove it down one of the estates and burnt it out. But he wasn't touched. It was a case of: oh, don't touch him, his da's in jail. Yet somebody else did it two weeks later and he got beat up. And people were very angry about that.

How comfortable did the young people feel about where they were living now?

I can't wait to leave this place, that's the truth. I'd like to move down South. Or to Australia. I hate the violence that still goes on, the gang violence.

It's getting worse. There's a residents' association started up our way,

all the ma's and da's are involved in it, they're out every weekend. And they don't target the older ones, it's mostly the 11-13 year-olds with their carry-outs. And all the ma's and da's are out because they say these ones with their carry-outs are all going nuts and trying to break into houses, breaking windies, and fighting and stealing cars.

They're always trying to move us on whenever we're just standing somewhere, and we just want to slap them for it. The vigilantes are still trying to move us on. And they forget that when they were at that age they all done it.

Even that day up at the jail we told them that when they were our age they were doing the same things, yet we're not allowed to stand at the corners now. But what are we supposed to do, there's nowhere to go? Any place good which has youth clubs, you find it's all kids who are younger than us. For those of us from 16 to 21 there's nowhere to go at nights.

I'd like it if people were more like S\_\_\_\_'s mummy. She lived in a corner house and the young ones used to drink their carry-outs outside her house. And her mummy would go out with a black bag and say, "Look, don't raise your voices too high and put your empties in that." It bothered people who came down the street, but it didn't bother her mummy, 'cause they weren't doing any harm, they were just standing there. There's a forest up in Poleglass and see if you're walking through it you get people questioning you, "What are you doing, where are you going?" "I'm walking up here, why?" "Well, make sure you do and don't be hanging about, like." Who do they think they are, like?

There was a place we'd go, near the Fort, it was out of the road and all, but if you shouted they could still hear us from the houses. And the residents couldn't stand this; like, we're not allowed to stand there, so we got brought up in front of Sinn Féin and you wanna seen that there. We were down in Connolly House and we were thinking we were going to get murdered, but this fella up our way, Jim, he had to stand up for us and represent us and got it all sorted out.

And yet the vigilantes know who is doing it, it's one main group around my way. Why don't they just target them and leave the rest of us alone?

My mummy is overprotective; she makes me come in at half nine, but I argued with her and she lets me out to ten. My daddy trusts me, 'cause he knows that everyone in Springhill knows me and if I did anything he would soon be told about it.

The gangs are getting worse though, there's more cars getting stolen, there's more people getting beat up for nothing. This is on their own community, this is nothing to do with Protestants and Catholics.

I saw a car drive up and four men jump out and start beating up two men and they broke things over their heads. Another guy was got and shot on the sole of his foot – it was done by a gang dealing in drugs.

I know a guy who deals and he says where else can he get a job that gives him so much; he thinks it's worth the risk.

What were their experiences of cross-community schemes?

It was alright but see whenever we were going home they started fighting with us and throwing stones and all.

Some trips I was on were okay, I had some good experiences. Although I missed the last get-together for one of the schemes 'cause my da was lifted and I couldn't go.

They wouldn't go to any Catholic areas with us but we went to Dundonald and their mates there started in on us. And one of our wee boys fought back and was near got. Their leader did nothing to try and control them, not like our leader with us. It depends on who is there. If there's a bunch of kids who just want to go and fight with Protestants then it'll be no good, and the same with the Protestant ones.

Are things better since the ceasefires?

It feels a bit safer.

But you never know, like.

My mother moved to Ardoyne, and we were at a Catholic march and the Orangies were sitting on the wall and people started fighting each other. During the last ceasefire there was an attack in Ardoyne and my mummy had us sitting at the top of the stairs in case the Orangies came in. We had chairs to throw down at them!

I still think it's safer now since the ceasefire.

Despite all the numerous problems, were the young people still happy to live within their communities?

I want to stay. All your mates are here, and I love here, like.

It's the gangs who's causing all the trouble and forcing us out. It should be them who is forced out.

Do they believe there will be lasting peace?

Yes, I think there will be.

It'll not go back to the same violence but it'll be worse with the gangs and the drugs. One gang beat up a guy for not giving them a few drinks he was carrying.

I don't know. If they don't sort the political thing out I think it'll go back.