



Prisoners' families - a help or a hindrance?

Karen Armstrong is director of criminal justice at Adfam and manages Adfam's The Road to Release programme.

Research shows that involving families can reduce family health problems and improve the impact of drugs education. Why, therefore asks Karen Armstrong, do some prison-based drug services perceive family involvement as hugely beneficial, or even essential, while others view it as irritating or even detrimental?

Despite the fact that they were supportive, his elderly grandparents were unable to travel to visit him. His grandparents were unaware that he used drugs but it was a major bone of contention between him and his stepfather. Consequently, at the time of his imprisonment, communication within this family was very strained.

The role of families in influencing drug using behaviour is a contentious issue. There is a wide evidence base to support the theory that involving families in the treatment of problematic drug use greatly enhances positive outcomes (indeed, American research cites family engagement as second only to legal enforcement as a means of ensuring adherence to treatment regimes). Families are often able to play a significant role in motivating drug users in to treatment and supporting them while they are there. But not all prison-based drug services welcome family involvement, perhaps because there is often a misunderstanding of what 'involvement' actually means.

drugs, or perception of what constitutes a drug 'problem'. This, in turn, often affects the ways in which they react. Involving families in treatment and/or support often means addressing some of these issues – even when drug use has not been identified as a 'problem'. It can also mean engaging with them more than the prisoner.

The following examples are used to highlight some of these changes.

Family 'A'

History

Prisoner 'A' was a 19 year old male with a long-standing criminal record for petty offences – often connected to his use of drugs and exacerbated by use of alcohol. Prior to being taken into custody for car theft and driving offences, he had been staying with his grandparents. (He had been told to leave the family home following a dispute.) His three half-siblings lived with his mother and stepfather.

The mother of Prisoner 'A' contacted Adfam following an upsetting reception visit. Her previous anger and frustration with her son's behaviour had rapidly turned to concern and confusion. She expressed feelings of inadequacy and guilt as a mother and a powerful feeling of anger towards her parents for 'over indulging' her errant son and leaving her to deal with the consequences. She was also concerned that her marriage would be threatened if she continued to visit her son.

This young man's imprisonment brought many of the difficult issues facing this family into sharp focus. This was, undoubtedly, a family in crisis and domestic visiting facilities were unlikely to enable meaningful communication to take place. (This

family had not had a civil 10 minute conversation for several months, let alone spent an hour sitting together at a table!)

Intervention

After establishing that this mother WANTED to support her son, and that he had not disclosed his substance misuse on reception, practical information was given and possible options were discussed. The prison was contacted and concerns expressed about the young man's emotional distress and a referral was made to the CARATS team. Further support – timed to coincide with visits to her son – focussed on relationship and communication issues, rather than solely on drugs and alcohol (those were naturally addressed). Eventually, Mother 'A's husband accompanied her and was able to receive support for himself while she was visiting her son.

Outcomes¹

- Prisoner 'A' was able to address his substance misuse with the help of the CARATS services – who were given permission to keep the family informed of both progress AND difficulties.
- Mother 'A' was able, in part, to accept that her imperfections did not make her a bad mother, wife or daughter. She learned to let go of her anger towards her parents when she was able to see that it was about her relationship with them rather than their indulgence of her son's behaviour.
- Mr 'A' developed a clearer understanding of his relationship with his stepson and an awareness of drug/alcohol misuse.
- The family, as a whole, were able to make plans for Prisoner 'A's release that were more realistic because they took account of potential difficulties for everyone involved and included support options for all.

For Family 'A' the issues were complex emotional issues. Treating Prisoner 'A' alone may have achieved some benefit but investing in the family as a whole added value to the drug treatment services and has, potentially, provided better long-term benefits for him.

Family 'B'

History

Prisoner 'B' was 25 years old when he received a three month prison sentence for an offence unrelated to his drug use. He was a recreational user of cannabis but did not consider himself to have a drug 'problem'. Prior to being taken into custody, Prisoner 'B' had been working as a barman and living with his partner in tied accommodation.

His partner was also 25 years old and in full time employment. She used cannabis occasionally when they were together but had never purchased it.

Partner 'B' contacted Adfam by telephone to express concerns about demands being placed upon her to supply cannabis. She was very tearful and kept asking what she should do.

Intervention

It was initially important to clarify the nature, and source, of the 'demands' being made in order to establish the urgency with which this woman needed to embark upon her preferred course of action.² Though it was apparent that she felt extremely frightened, the nature of the demands being made did not place this woman – or anyone else – in immediate danger. Once she recognised the reality of her situation, she was better able to relax and explore her options before making a decision. During the subsequent discussion it became clear that the dynamic within couple 'B's relationship seemed to have subtly changed as a result of imprisonment. Where cannabis use had been a shared activity (and had depended upon Prisoner 'B' securing and preparing a supply) it was now something that Partner 'B' had established as an independent activity as a means of coping with additional pressure. Because it transpired that Partner 'B' was shocked and distressed by the manner in which her partner had made his demands, rather than by the subject of them, it was vitally important to repeatedly make clear the potential implications should she decide to supply cannabis.

Outcomes³

- Partner 'B' became fully aware of the potential implications of supplying cannabis and was adamant that she would not concede to her partner's demands
- No evidence emerged to suggest that Prisoner 'B' used cannabis in custody or that Partner 'B' engaged in supplying

Couple 'B's problems may, on the surface, have seemed minimal. However, the ways in which the power and control shifted because of Prisoner 'B's imprisonment, and the way in which that shift affected them both, could have resulted in: a potential breach of security at the prison; a positive mandatory drug test; closed visits; a visits ban and/or criminal record for Partner 'B'.

Making the most of prisoners' families as an untapped resource

Adfam works with, and for, families affected by drugs, alcohol and criminal justice issues and recognises the valuable role that many of them can fulfil in supporting both their users and the criminal justice system. But families need to feel empowered and enabled in that role and to have their own needs acknowledged. To make the most of the support potential that exists among families of substance users, there needs to be a much more willing and creative approach to involving them at a variety of levels.

¹Contact from Mother 'A' approximately one month after release suggested that, despite the inevitable ups and downs, family relationships were greatly improved and her son remained drug free.

²Confidentiality limitations were explained.

³No ongoing contact after release.