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AN INFANT OR A SMALL CHILD IN PRISON WITH A PARENT

- **could a prison be a good place to raise a child?**

When a parent takes a child with her/him in prison the best interest of the child must be thought in many places and in many situations. Child's best interest is not necessarily the same as the mothers, fathers or the siblings, nor is the same as the prisons or other authorities. Child's best interest can change rapidly: if it was best for a baby to be in prison with a parent yesterday, the situation may not be the same today. Many times compromises have to be made; usually there isn't any perfect solution.

New practice in Finland

When a Finnish mother or a father is sentenced, she/he has a possibility to take under 2-year old child with her/him to a Prison Family Unit if both child welfare and the prison authorities consider it to be the best interest of the child. Child welfare services makes placement at the Family unit for the child and The Assessment Centre at the Criminal sanctions makes a placement for the parent at the same Family unit. This practice is new; it has been in use since year 2010. For decades before this it was common that a mother came to prison with a baby in her lap as a surprise.

The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters is a large child welfare organization in Finland. We had a 4-years project that aimed at developing mother child work in Finnish prisons. During those four years a wide range of changes took place. Changes were both at the practical level and at the level of minds. We found out what is a child's path to prison with his parent (almost always with the mother), who does he meet and who decides the child's access to prison. There was intensive and successful co-operation between two ministries (The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health) which led to changes in the law. New laws take more account the best interest of the child when a parent is sentenced.

The best interest of the child in every step of the process

We have shared a lot of information to every part that meets the upcoming prisoner and her child. We also created a co-operation network between the Enforcement Office, The Criminal Sanctions Assessment Centre, Child Welfare, Prisons and the Family Unit in prison. It is everyone's responsibility to take care of the best interest of the child and transfer information from step to step.

When the mother visits the Enforcement Office and tells that she has small child the information goes to Assessment Centre and they contact Child Welfare. After exchanging information between Assessment Centre, Child Welfare, Prison and the Family Unit in prison, the placement of the child can be made taking the best interest of the child into account. Usually the child can not be placed to father or other relatives and it is Child Welfare's duty to resolve the best place for the child. If it is the Family Unit in prison, the Assessment Centre allocates a place for the parent in the same Family Unit.

During the project we also made simple worktable where very authority can find right question to make so that he can be sure that the best interest of the child is taken into consideration.

Is there room for a child in prison environment?

The prison environment is, of course, the first thing that an incoming child sees and experiences. What is it like in child's perspective? Does he see high walls and bars on the windows, does he meet lots of unknown (perhaps scary) people on the corridors? Does he hear harsh and frightening voices? On whose lap he is? Is someone doing a body search for him, how is it done? Is mother near all the time? Those are big issues for a baby and often very easy to make them easier for the baby. The time child spends in prison is full of those kinds of moments. It is good if somebody thinks about those little things from a small child's point of view.

The family unit in Finnish Vanaja open prison has been designed with the needs of the children in mind and it is as home-like as possible. It can accommodate up to ten mothers with their children. Hämeenlinna closed prison has a unit for prisoners held on remand and it has facilities for three prisoners and their children.

Challenging maternity in prison

The time in prison is also challenging for the parent. All the everyday activities are naturally more complicated. Feeding the baby, washing the laundry, getting all the necessary accessories for the child or even putting baby to sleep is sometimes difficult. Mothers can also worry about their children's safety: What if the baby gets sick or if someone tries to hurt him? What if the baby is crying a lot and the mother is getting tired or depressed? Who will help the mother during the day/night time and how? What are the causes to take the baby away from a parent and does the parent know them?

The ambivalence of the staff

The presence of a child often raises mixed emotions in staff. For the prison personnel a baby or a small child is not familiar element, a child is "a civil person" who doesn't actually belong to prison. Many of the staff are mothers and father themselves and seeing a baby behind the bars may be painful. Prison staff is sometimes unsure when to intervene to things happening between mother and a child. A child also does not act like a prisoner; it doesn't follow the rules and regulations. Mother should be the guardian and the director of her child also in prison but it is difficult because she has to follow the prison rules. She has to be a good mother and a good prisoner at the same time. The project offered training for the prison staff to pay attention and observe the children better. There was a lot of discussion how and when to intervene if the situation needed interventions.

What are the needs of the child and the mother during the time in prison?

Every prisoner in Finland has a personal sentence plan in which is defined what are the goals of the sentence. If the prisoner has a child with her, one of the goals is always "to take good care of her child in Family Unit in prison". Child Welfare makes a plan for the child and defines the goals for the child's period in prison. The Family Unit staff in prison reflects with the mother how all these goals are achieved. All the work done is documented by the rules of Child Welfare Law.

The Family Unit in prison is a child welfare unit supervised by the National Institute for Health and Welfare and it is staffed by family support workers. During the project they all got half year-long training for the work. The staff is available in open prison unit daily between 7:00 to 22:00 and in closed prison unit from Monday to Friday from 8:00 to 16:00.

We think it is sometimes an opportunity to a prisoner to have her child with her in prison. It is a moment to pause and think for how the life is going. Many times it is the first time for the mother that she gets help and support, or the first time she is accepting help. For the child the prison-time means proper meals in regular mealtimes, regular daytime naps and outdoor times and night-time that is protected for sleeping. For the mother the presence of the child can be motivator to rehabilitation.

The release plan is made by the prison staff, Child Welfare Social worker, Family Unit family worker and the mother. Housing and how to manage financially or cope with everyday life are included in plan. Most of the prisoners in Family Unit in prison are released through a period of supervised probationary freedom.

Jaana Wikgren
Coordinator
The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters
Asemamiehenkatu 4
00520 Helsinki
FINLAND

jaana.wikgren@ensijaturvakotienliitto.fi
tel. +358 400 153 227