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Maintaining Family Ties: How Family Practices Are Renegotiated to Promote Mother–Child Contact

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ABSTRACT

Family life can be seriously disrupted when a mother is imprisoned. The separation changes and often reduces the type, frequency and quality of contact that can be achieved between family members, and especially for children when their mothers were their primary carers and living with them before her imprisonment. In England and Wales, prisoners are permitted contact with children and families through prison visits, telephone contact and letter-writing through the post, and in some prisons via email. Despite the recent policy interest in supporting prisoners' family ties, research has highlighted the challenges that families and prisoners face using these communicative mechanisms. Building on this, the chapter contributes new knowledge by shifting the lens to explore how family members construct and adjust their practices to promote mother–child contact during maternal imprisonment.

The empirical study draws on semistructured interviews with mothers in prison and family members (caregivers) to children of female prisoners. Guided by a 'family practices' theoretical framework (Morgan, 2011), the findings show *innovative adjustments*, a *willingness to make sacrifices* and *alternative routes to improve contact* utilised by mothers and caregivers to prioritise mother–child contact. We see the strength, resilience and autonomy shown by family members to promote their relationships in spite of communicative barriers. There are important lessons to be learned from the families' lived experience for policy and practice, which, without due and genuine consideration, might further hinder opportunities for mother–child contact during maternal imprisonment.

KEYWORDS

Maintaining family ties; contact in prison; mother–child contact; mothers in prison; prisoners' children and families; family practices

INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, the female prisoner population in England and Wales has trebled (MoJ, 2013). Consequently, more mothers and children are separated by imprisonment and are seeking to maintain their relationships through the available channels of communication provided by prisons. In England and Wales, communication can be achieved through prison visits, telephones and letterwriting through the post, and in some prisons, via email (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), 2016). However, as most mothers were actively involved in caretaking and living with their children before prison (Caddle & Crisp, 1997), the quality, nature and frequency of mother–child contact that these forms of communication enable during a custodial sentence is significantly different and often reduced.

Consistently, research has found that the hardest aspect of imprisonment for mothers is the separation from their children (Baldwin, 2015; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Masson, 2019). Opportunities for mothering in prison are complex and challenging, though many mothers continue parenting from prison, reactively negotiating their maternal role within the family despite being physically separate from them (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2004; Enos, 2001). Central to these mothering practices is staying in touch with children and families (Booth, 2017a). Maternal imprisonment also affects a large number of children who often experience disruptions and disadvantages in their daily lives (Gordon, 2018). The 18,000 children a year estimated to experience maternal imprisonment (Corston, 2007) are generally looked after by family members and often by grandparents and female relatives (Caddle & Crisp, 1997). Responsibility to facilitate, finance and maintain communication during a mother's sentence falls to these caregiving family members as the bridge or 'gatekeepers' (Tasca, 2016) to mother–child contact.

Already there is a growing body of research which examines opportunities and challenges of family contact in prison (e.g., Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2003; Condry, 2007; Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Sharratt, 2014; Tasca, Mulvery, & Rodriguez, 2016). This evidence describes how families struggle to adjust their practices in accordance with prison rules and regulations; for instance, by managing face-to-face contact at predetermined visiting times and in restrictive visiting spaces, as well as relying on expensive prison telephones for virtual contact. In a different way, this chapter shifts the lens to how family members

construct and adjust their practices to promote contact during maternal imprisonment. Empirical findings drawn from semistructured interviews with mothers in prison and family members (caregivers) to children of female prisoners are explored with the aim of contributing new knowledge about the resilience and autonomy shown by families seeking to maintain their family relationships. This involves a closer examination of the way family members position themselves, understand the significance of mother–child contact and find and utilise creative methods to better enable them to sustain these relationships via the communication channels available to them in prison. Critically, the examination in this chapter bolsters our understanding of the challenges of maintaining mother–child contact in and around the prison context and, in spite of the strength and efforts of family members to promote these relationships, the significant inadequacies in the communication policies and practices that are available to family members. There are important lessons to be learned from the families’ lived experience, which, without due and genuine consideration, will continue to hinder opportunities for mother–child contact during maternal imprisonment.

POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE CHALLENGES OF ‘MAINTAINING FAMILY TIES’

The Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2018a) announced plans for Lord Farmer to conduct a review into the family ties of women in the criminal justice system, and in particular to explore how family relationships might help to reduce reoffending. This focus parallels an earlier review which examined the role of the family as a ‘resettlement agency’ for men in prison (Farmer, 2017). It also echoes the burgeoning policy interest in recent years which has viewed ‘children and families’ as a pathway to reduce re-offending (HMIP, 2016; Home Office, 2004). This perspective has gained legitimacy and has attracted the interest of policymakers because families can provide social, practical and financial support to a person while they are in prison and once they are released. This social capital is considered vital to support a person’s desistance from crime and resettlement into the community (Mills & Codd, 2008). Yet, disparities between this *policy* rhetoric, which strongly advocates family ties, and the challenges of managing family relationships *in practice* owing to restrictions and limitations in visiting, telephone contact and letter-writing are apparent (Booth, 2018a).

There are two main forms of visits: social visits and family visits. However, given the smaller number of female prisoners in England, families travel, on average, 50 miles to visit a woman in prison (National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2013) which creates logistical and financial challenges for families, particularly children's caregivers who often have responsibility for taking children to visit their mother in prison (Baldwin, 2015; Booth, 2016, 2017b; NOMS, 2013). Yet, social visits usually last between one and two hours, and convicted prisoners are permitted one visit every fortnight. A family-friendly environment is not always achieved at the prison during social visits, as visitors are subjected to stringent search procedures on arrival, and mothers are restricted from moving around, playing and interacting with children during the visit (Baldwin, 2015; Booth, 2016). By comparison, family visits (also known as family days or children's days) are often preferred by families. These visits provide an opportunity for an extended, more-relaxed prison visiting experience for children and mothers (Booth, 2018b). They are designed to enable family time in a 'more normalised environment' (NOMS, 2011) which means mothers can move about, play and interact with children. However, because visits are popular with families, they are often oversubscribed, underresourced and vulnerable to operational issues, such as delays from staff shortages (Booth, 2018b).

In addition to face-to-face contact, families can remain connected on the telephone and via letter-writing facilities (HMIP, 2016). Telephone contact is one-way (from prison to the community) and prisoners must finance their calls from wages earned in the prison and/or from money sent in by family members. A common barrier to prison telephones is their location in busy, loud prison wings (HMIP, 2016) with access restricted to prescribed times in the prison regime (e.g., association time). In-cell telephones have been identified as a useful facility to improve flexibility and privacy (Booth, 2018c), with the current Secretary of State for Justice, David Gauke, proposing that all prisons should have in-cell telephones (BBC, 2018). This was a welcomed development, but one which requires additional consideration as the costs of telephoning from prison are substantially higher than in the community, with calls to mobile phones being higher again (Booth, 2018c; Prison Reform Trust (PRT), 2006). Letter-writing continues to be widely used today and, in essence, an unlimited number of letters can be sent and received by post. However, aside from one prepaid letter every week (HMIP, 2016), prisoners must finance their own letters, paying for paper, stamps and envelopes in the same way as telephone credit. In some prisons, families can use the email-a-prisoner service. For a small fee (30p for a 50-line message),

families can email a letter to a prisoner, which is printed, security checked and delivered by the prison. Current provisions only enable one-way emails, and in some prisons emailing services are not available (HMIP, 2016).

Taken together, there are a number of challenges to maintaining family ties in and around the prison setting through visiting, telephones and letter-writing. This illuminates some of the practical issues facing families seeking to maintain their relationships and highlights problems with the recent pressure being applied to family ties as a mechanism to curb recidivism in policy discourse. There are, however, pockets of 'good practice' across the women's estate, for instance, through initiatives such as an overnight family facility, Acorn House, at HMP Askham Grange (Raikes & Lockwood, 2011) and Storybooks Mum which operates at a number of prisons (see Rees, Staples, & Maxwell, 2017). Yet, we know much less about how family members might innovatively respond to the above challenges by finding and using creative ways to promote their family relationships. Thus, it is important to consider the lived reality of negotiating this situation from the experiences of family members with first-hand experience of maintaining their family ties during maternal imprisonment.

FAMILY PRACTICES: CONTEXT AND THEORY

Several studies have found that mothers in prison show a strong commitment to sustaining their mothering identity despite the relational, practical and physical challenges facing them by virtue of their detainment (Baldwin, 2015; Celinska & Seigel, 2010; Enos, 2001). This research suggests how engaging in mothering activities helps women reaffirm and maintain their motherhood identity whilst serving their custodial sentence. We might better understand mothering practices in prison by using the sociological lens provided by Morgan's (1999, p. 16) theory of 'family practices', which emphasises the importance of 'doing' family. He proposes that family life should be seen as series of 'family practices' which have a fluid and active meaning, whereby individuals are responding to circumstances and emphasising the 'doing' of activities (Morgan, 1999, 2011) as opposed to 'being' within a family unit. There has been a shift away from viewing parenthood as a biological or normatively prescribed status as a result of reproduction, regarded instead 'as something parents *do* rather than something they *are*' (Williams, 2004, p. 31, italics

original). For women in prison, maintaining contact with children and families is one key way to continue *doing* mothering (Booth, 2017a).

Likewise, family members who assume care of the children during the mothers' imprisonment are also required to carefully adjust and renegotiate their lives to accommodate the changes to their family situation (Hairston, 2009). With regard to contact, research has found that a mother's ability to stay actively involved in her children's life while in prison will likely be reliant on the children's caregiver or 'intermediaries' to facilitate and support communication (Haney, 2013; Tasca, 2016). Research from the United States found that the nature of the relationship between the caregiver and the imprisoned mother is what determines mother-child contact (Enos, 2001; Poehlmann, Shlafer, Maes, & Hanneman, 2008; Tasca, 2016). This aligns with Morgan's theory (1999) which explains how family members subjectively interpret relationships within a particular context and renegotiate their practices in response to this. For families separated by maternal imprisonment, it is important to explore how mothers and caregivers might understand their relationships and mould their practices to adapt and construct opportunities to maintain contact within the system that is available.

METHODS

The empirical findings presented in this chapter are taken from a study that qualitatively explored the intersection between prison life and family life from the perspectives of family members with this lived experience in England and Wales. The research aimed to critically examine the different forms of communication used for mother-child contact.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with family members in 30 families, comprised of 15 serving prisoners who self-identified as mothers, and 24 caregivers, comprised of partners, grandparents and friends who had assumed caretaking responsibilities of the children while their mother was in prison.¹ The larger sample of caregivers reflects the caregiving circumstances in families; as in most cases, there was more than one person looking after the children in the family during mothers' absence (i.e. grandmother and grandfather).

¹ Note: the mothers and caregivers were not recruited from within the same families.

A purposive sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012) ensured that all participants met the eligibility criteria, where the mother was convicted and had at least one child under 18 years old. Interviews were conducted at least 2 months after the mother was first taken into custody to enable the family to have sufficient familiarity with the prison environment and time to adjust to their new family circumstances. All the mothers were recruited from one female prison. Information posters and leaflets were distributed under all cell doors providing information about the study and inviting mothers to participate. Caregivers were recruited across four female prisons and primarily via prison visitors centres and prison family workers. Ethical approval was gained from the researcher's university, and following instructions in Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 22/2014 (NOMS) permission was also gained from the National Research Council and the prison Governors at the four female establishments where the research took place. All participants provided written and oral consent to take part in the research interview and extra care was taken during the interviews on account of the sensitive topic under investigation. Consent was treated as an ongoing process, and close attention was paid to body language with several breaks or pauses in the interview being offered to respond to the emotional needs of participants.

The interviews asked participants about their family lives before and during the sentence, to describe how and in what ways they maintained contact and to consider their thoughts and feelings about their attempts to stay in touch. With participants permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, where all identifying information was removed. The names used to identify participants and their family members later in this chapter are pseudonyms. The data were analysed thematically to organise and identify patterns and themes in the data, as having originated from the participants' own descriptions on their lives and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although interviews were not conducted directly with children, across the whole sample, 63 children aged 18 and under were experiencing the imprisonment of their mother. In 22 of the 30 families, the mothers had been primary carers and living with children prior to their sentence. In all but one of the families, the mother in prison had some form of contact with her children during the sentence.

There are possible benefits and limitations to the sample in this study that require additional consideration. During recruitment, women in prison were invited to participate if they self-identified as a mother. Enos (2001) found that mothers serving their first sentence tended to be more actively involved in mothering practices than women who had

multiple prior convictions. This may explain why the sample was primarily comprised of mothers serving their first sentence and seeking to maintain contact with their children. Likewise, the cohort of caregivers were mostly (n = 13) recruited in the prison visitor's centres, which, by default, meant they were willing to maintain contact with the mother in prison. Again, most (n = 14) were experiencing separation by imprisonment for the first time. Therefore, the sample likely represents a particular group of families who were willing and motivated to maintain and prioritise mother–child contact. There are many possible reasons that contact may not be chosen, appropriate or supported (Masson & Booth, 2018), and it should be recognised that the realities of maternal imprisonment in these families will probably be different. Nonetheless, the sample offers a unique opportunity to gain insights into the ways in which families can respond to these challenging communicative circumstances when they wish to maintain mother–child contact.

FINDINGS

The findings that follow are divided into three sections. First, the mothers and caregivers' accounts revealed *innovative adjustments* made to their practices to enhance opportunities for frequent and meaningful contact via the channels of communication available to them (e.g., visits, telephone contact, letter-writing). Relatedly, the second theme shows the ways in which family members had a *willingness to make sacrifices*, personal and/or financial, if they considered that this would better enable mother–child contact. The third theme illuminates how families were willing to try to use the system through *alternative routes to improve contact* if they considered that this might alleviate some of the challenges of staying in touch. Going forward, it should be remembered that these findings are framed by the families' shared understanding that mother–child contact should be prioritised and that the channels of communication available in prison were limited (Booth, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Innovative Adjustments

While it is inevitable the sample of mothers and caregivers in this study were attempting to maintain contact in different ways (e.g., letters, telephones) and to varying degrees (e.g., frequency), certain characteristics identified in their

accounts enable us to bring their perceptions of maintaining contact more clearly into focus. First, their descriptions indicated understanding of the routes of communication available to them. This knowledge was primarily garnered through their lived experience of navigating contact, from information shared by others (e.g., other families visiting) and to a lesser extent directly from the prison (e.g., during induction, information shared in visitors' centres). Many family members talked about the different ways they stayed in contact with one another and revealed ways in which they had made *innovative adjustments* to their practices to better facilitate contact. Although still adhering to the prison rules and regulations, their descriptions indicate creative ways they moulded their practices to make the most of the available forms of communication. One mother, Stephanie, revealed how she used the one prepaid envelope provided by the prison (HMIP, 2016) to write to her mother and all seven children, personalising sections of the letter by using different coloured pens for each child:

We get one envelope a week here, it's not enough. I mean I can't afford to buy stamps and things like that [...] so I write a letter to my Mum [and] I include all the kids, and I do it in sections, where I say 'to Lisa', 'to Martin'...I do them all in different coloured pens. I do them a multi-coloured letter so they all have their own [section of the letter] (Stephanie, mother).

Although Stephanie did not have the financial resources to write individual letters to her children, she creatively made use of the one prepaid letter provided to ensure that she was able to communicate with each child individually. Another innovative adjustment to improve letter-writing contact was observed in the practices of one grandmother caregiver, Rebecca. She acknowledged how sending and receiving letters was crucial to her daughter in prison and enjoyable for her granddaughter for whom she was caring. However, when sending writing materials to the prison for her daughter, she realised that books of stamps were going 'missing'. She seemed unaware that these were likely being removed for security reasons,² but still adjusted her practices to ensure that she could continue supporting her daughter to write, by instead including stamped addressed envelopes:

Interviewer – do you keep in contact with letters as well?

² Some prisons do not allow stamps to be sent to prisoners from friends and family for security reasons (e.g., drug smuggling).

Rebecca – Yes, we try to keep it going as much as we can because my daughter said that's the best part of the week; receiving mail and then getting to write back to everybody. So, yeah, we do that and she's constantly writing letters to my granddaughter, and pictures and allsorts which is really nice for her..., so I send self-addressed envelopes with stamps on them because we can't send stamps in because they go missing, so you have to send the envelopes with the stamps but now I do this, it's better (Rebecca, grandmother caregiver).

Another practical change made by Rebecca was through the installation of a landline telephone in her home. Towards the start of her daughter's sentence, they realised the high telephone charges for calling her mobile phone were reducing the frequency, length and quality of telephone contact. This echoes previous research which found that telephone calls from prison are more expensive than calls made in the community, and especially calls to mobile phones (PRT, 2006). Rebecca explains how she did not want their telephone conversations to be limited because of the higher cost of calling her mobile phone:

When she was first ringing on my mobile she said it was just eating her credit and we've not had a landline before and so what I said is 'we'll put one in for this period of time because it's not very long and it'll be cheaper for you to call home' because I said 'I don't want you limiting yourself just because you have to ring a mobile' (Rebecca, grandmother caregiver).

Rochelle was also aware that the high costs of phoning a relative's mobile to speak with her children from prison was using more money than when she phoned a landline. She revealed how she tried to reach her children when they visited their nana's house because she had a landline telephone so the phone calls would last longer and she could speak to all three children individually:

The kids go to their nana's every day and she's got a house phone so I tend to try and phone them on the house phone there..., it just costs a fortune [on] the mobile when you're trying to speak to all 3 of them and give them enough time (Rochelle, mother).

Ensuring that the maximum amount of time to interact and communicate on visits was another priority for the families. As social visits can be busy (especially weekend visiting

times) one grandmother caregiver, Ava, realised there were often delays with security checks and getting into the prison to see her daughter. As she became more familiar with the visiting system, she realised that entry to the prison worked on a first come, first served basis. Because of this, she explains how they arrived at the prison at least 45 minutes before the scheduled visiting time to book in early and so that her granddaughters would have as much time as possible to spend face-to-face with their mum:

After a few visits, I realised that you need to be there, as I say, about 45 minutes [before the visit starts], then you're near the front so we tend to try and make sure we're there early so that we can try and have the full 2 hours with her (Ava, grandmother caregiver).

The innovative adjustments identified in this section have shown how mothers and caregivers understood their position as having the potential to better facilitate contact. From this, they renegotiated and moulded their 'family practices' (Morgan, 1999) so that the way in which they were *doing* family was improving mother–child contact.

Willingness to Make Sacrifices

While the practices negotiated and adapted by family members discussed so far can be largely characterised as having positive features, there are also some negative outcomes experienced by individuals in this plight for better contact. Building on the first theme, a significant characteristic of the accounts of the mothers and caregivers was a *willingness to make sacrifices*. It is important to appreciate how the negotiations made by mothers and caregivers were not devoid of implications or undertaken lightly. Revealed in their accounts is a clear willingness to make personal sacrifices if it was deemed in the best interests of the children. By way of explanation, many of the mothers revealed how they saved what money they earned from working in the prison to finance telephone calls to their children. The pot of money used to finance telephone calls (via telephone credit as it is known in prison) is also used to buy other luxuries purchased from the canteen (e.g., tobacco, letter-writing materials, toiletries, coffee, chocolate, clothes). To put as much money towards their telephone credit, many of the mothers revealed how they did not buy other items from the canteen:

You get £10 a week in here, but out of that £10 you've got to get your fags out of that, your burn, you've got to get your [telephone] credit out of that, your coffee and

your sugar and things like that.³ I mean, I don't take sugar no more; I don't drink coffee no more. I'll drink the water, so to me, that's an extra £2 on my credit that I can speak to my kids (Sarah, mother).

Leanne was concerned about relying on her family to send in money to top up her wages earned in the prison as they were already struggling to afford the additional caregiving costs of looking after her 20-month-old baby and 8-year-old son. She asked them to stop sending money to her so that they could focus on providing for her children. To mitigate the impact this might have on her ability to call her children, she made the decision to give up smoking so that she could put the extra money saved from the canteen towards her telephone credit:

I feel like they're being punished and the only person to blame is myself and that's a fact. I do owe my family a lot, what they've struggled with and I didn't want to keep relying on my family for money so I decided to live on my £10 a week wages but you can't afford to buy tobacco and telephone credit, and coffee and sugar, so I just quit smoking (Leanne, mother). (Celinska & Seigel, 2010; Enos, 2001).

Although coffee, sugar and smoking might seem like a small indulgence to forego, in the context of prison, where rules and restrictions govern every aspect of a person's life, such perceived luxuries can provide a heightened sense of normality. These sacrifices held significance in another sense as supporting previous research; they were also continuing to perform mothering practices from prison to mitigate some of the harms of the separation for children.

Research from the United States with children's caregivers identified them as 'gatekeepers' (Tasca, 2016), but much less is known about the way they understand and perform this role in England and Wales. In this study, the caregivers, as with the mothers, were willing to make sacrifices to enable mother-child contact. Ava was already caring for her elderly mother full-time when she started looking after her two young granddaughters (aged 3 and 18 months old) when both their parents were sent to prison. The additional caregiving responsibilities were a struggle, with her repeatedly talking about how 'hard' she found her role. Part of this involved driving her granddaughters to the prison every fortnight to visit their mother, and although she acknowledged how making additional

³ Burn is another word used for tobacco in prison.

journeys would be timely and costly, she also expressed a willingness to visit more frequently if the prison permitted it. She considered this contact to be a priority for the children:

I do think that for children maybe there should be more visits, maybe just one a week. What they need is smaller, regular visits I reckon, but then again, it's an hour's drive there and an hour's drive back..., so yes it would be a pain going there every week not to mention more money, but for her children to see their mother, I would do it. They need to see their mum (Ava, grandmother caregiver).

In a similar way, Daniel, a father caregiver expressed concerns about his financial situation since his wife was imprisoned and following the loss of her income in the household. Owing to health problems, he was reliant on his benefits to support their children, three of whom were under 18 years old and living at home.⁴ However, the children asked to see their mum, so he prioritised taking them up to the prison to visit to see her, despite the associated costs of doing so:

It's like 75 miles there and 75 miles back and also when you're on benefits and stuff like that it does take quite a chunk out of your money each week..., but the kids had been saying that they wanted to see their Mum and I'm not going to stop them from coming to see their Mum (Daniel, father caregiver).

It was noticeable in the interviews that there was overriding priority given to mother–child contact by both mothers and caregivers. This was to help alleviate or offset some of the potential harm that the separation might bring, even when a sacrifice had to be made. These actions might be interpreted as a way of doing family, as their practices were carefully renegotiated to respond to the restrictions placed on their family relationships by the prison system. This theme also enables a fuller understanding of the harsh lived reality of managing family relationships within this context.

Alternative Routes to Improve Contact

So far, the findings have shown how mothers and caregivers were adapting their practices to have better communication through visits, telephone and letter-writing contact. In a different way, this third theme demonstrates how families identified and pursued

⁴ Daniel and his wife had four children; two were his biological children and two stepchildren.

alternatives routes to improve contact. In conducting much of their family lives in and around the prison setting, and learning about the different processes and systems, they became privy to other mechanisms to enhance mother–child contact. For instance, Kayley requested to be transferred to another prison in the hope that she would be located closer to where her 5-year-old daughter lived to enable face-to-face contact:

I never had any visits [at my last prison] because it was too far for my daughter to travel and so I asked to come to this prison for my visits and they said ‘yes’, so they had to wait until there was space to transfer me, and then I came here (Kayley, mother).

Prison transfers can occur with or without consultation with the individual prisoner about their wishes and with little notice. Mothers do not have the final decision about being transferred, and it is not guaranteed. However, for Kayley, her request resulted in her being moved prisons, which subsequently meant that she was able to be visited by her daughter again.

Likewise, Esther requested support to have better contact with her children through Childcare Resettlement Leave (CRL). Although not widely discussed in existing literature, CRL provides an opportunity for low risk prisoners who have sole caregiving responsibilities to participate in family-related activities outside of the prison and can include a maximum of three nights home leave (Prison Service Order (PSO) 6300/2012, NOMS). Esther learned about CRL from another mother early into her sentence and was keen to get this alternative form of contact to provide additional opportunities to see her two school-aged children for whom she had been sole and primary carer prior to her sentence. Although it took 6 months for this to be granted, she appreciated the opportunity to see her two children at home and in a more relaxed environment:

I started asking for child resettlement in the first month [in prison] and although it took them about 6 months to sort it out, I got ‘maintaining family ties’ eventually..., it was really nice seeing the kids outside of the prison environment, it was more relaxing for them (Esther, mother).

Grandparents Jasmine and Terry were also keen for their daughter, as sole carer to their grandson, to be granted CRL after they had discovered this was a possibility through a high court ruling being discussed in the media. When they spoke with the family worker at

their daughter's prison, they were initially told that CRL did not operate at that establishment but they lobbied hard to ensure their daughter had access to this:

Terry – Because they never had CRL, they didn't do any of that, no-one was entitled to it and we fought so, so hard because there was a court case that happened in 2012..., and it was a case of 'you are eligible for CRL from day one', so we pushed for that and our daughter was the very first, yeah she was the first one out of that prison [to have CRL] as we understand it.

Interviewer – you said that you pushed for her to get the CRL's, so how did you go about doing that, as parents?

Jasmine – phone calls, we emailed the Governor, we emailed her probation officer and sent them copies of what was in the [news] paper about that court case.

Terry – emailed our MP, everything (Terry and Jasmine, grandparent caregivers).

There is a paucity of information about CRL, and so it is not clear how many women in prison know about CRL, and/or how many are able to utilise this provision to maintain relationships with children. However, we can see from these families that CRL is considered an alternative, and worthwhile, route to pursue for better mother–child contact. Although in different ways, and to different degrees, it was clear that mothers and caregivers were willing to identify and utilise alternative mechanisms to maintain their family ties beyond the basic provisions provided through visits, telephone contact and letter-writing. These resistances show how families were prepared to go to great lengths to ensure that every opportunity for contact was utilised.

DISCUSSION

Within the current context which has seen heightened policy attention and concern for prisoners' family ties (Farmer, 2017; HMIP, 2016; Home Office, 2004), it is important that nuanced understandings of these relationships are gained. International research in this area has highlighted the challenges of maintaining contact with a loved one in prison (Christian, 2005; Comfort, 2003; Dixey & Woodall, 2012; Sharratt, 2014) including the serious and substantial inadequacies identified with the conduits to mother–child contact by participants in this study (e.g., Booth, 2018b, 2018c). Although framed with awareness

that opportunities for contact are problematic, the findings presented in this chapter contribute new knowledge that draws attention to the resilient and inventive ways that families make decisions and mould their activities to sustain their relationships. Using Morgan's (1999) theory of 'family practices', we can appreciate how families are dynamic, fluid and reactive to their circumstances. One of the primary lessons learned from this study is that mothers and caregivers will find ways to creatively negotiate their 'family practices' to improve contact *in spite of* the restrictions and problems with the available channels of communication.

Previous research indicates that women attempt to continue mothering in prison (Baldwin, 2015; Enos, 2001; Haney, 2013) and that the children's caregivers are key facilitators to mother-child contact (Hairston, 2009; Tasca, 2016; Tasca et al., 2016). Expanding our understanding of this, the findings indicate how these family members were subjectively interpreting their own position as having potential to improve the nature and frequency of contact. This was identified through the *innovative adjustments* that the mothers and caregivers made. For instance, as their familiarity with the system increased, they also became privy to the boundaries set by rules and regulations; what was possible and permitted and what enabled better opportunities for contact. From this, they could renegotiate their practices to better suit their family's needs, from using different coloured pens in the one prepaid letter to write to all children or arriving at the prison ahead of the scheduled visiting time to ensure the longest possible time spent face-to-face with the mother. Through these 'family practices', we not only see an explicit prioritising of family relationships but also, more implicitly, some resistances in their accounts drawn from their sense of having a role with some (albeit limited) autonomy.

Relatedly, in the second theme, the family members' willingness to make sacrifices to enhance and create new opportunities for communication showed the strong desire to promote mother-child contact even when this came at an expense, whether personal or financial. These findings may be reflective of the samples that, as mentioned previously, were recruited in ways which likely produced a group of families who were overwhelmingly focussed on maintaining their family ties. Yet, interestingly family members were motivated to make these sacrifices for the sake of the children who were perceived to be unfairly punished by the circumstances. Although the 'collateral consequences' (Condry, Kotova, & Minson, 2016; Turanovic, Rodriguez & Pratt, 2012) of parental imprisonment on 'invisible'

children (Gordon, 2018) have been discussed widely in academe, of critical concern is that these anxieties have not translated into policy which, instead advocates families' ties because they are viewed as a 'resettlement agency' (Farmer, 2017). This discord between policy and practice is problematic not only because it might hinder opportunities for support but also because it fails to recognise the lived reality of sustaining contact for families about whom the policies are referring. In particular, these findings indicate new insights into the lengths that family members undertake to alleviate the harm to children caused through the separation, as well as the associated negative implications experienced Because of the sacrifices made.

Furthermore, the broader examination of 'family practices' also enabled a fuller understanding of the additional activities that families were *doing* to facilitate contact (Morgan, 2011) in addition to the usual conduits for communication: visiting, telephones and letter-writing. Although prison transfer and CRL requests may appear to be part of the fabric of prison life to some observers, they held significant meaning to the family members who generally had little confidence in the system around which they had to navigate. It is important to delineate these practices as 'family practices' as they are a set of social activities which were undertaken for the purpose of sustaining family relationships. These actions are understood as part of the process of *doing* family in the given circumstances and demonstrate creative, resilient methods to promote family life through alternative routes. To ensure these opportunities are available to more families, prison workers and practitioners need to work in collaboration with families to explore their personal circumstances and the role that the prison could play to support or supplement opportunities to maintain their family ties.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Realistically, the families' attempts to mitigate the challenges of sustaining contact can only stretch so far. Although the findings in this chapter present new insights into some of the resilience and autonomy family members can display through their practices during maternal imprisonment, they are still restricted by the rules and regulations of the prison. For instance, although telephone calls to landlines are cheaper than mobile phones, mothers in prison still struggle to afford telephone credit because call charges from prison are higher than in the community.

Despite the best attempts made by families to enhance mother–child contact from the bottom-up, responsibility for enabling communication further is only possible top-down. The emphasis on ‘maintaining family ties’ in policy is accompanied by an absence of responsible governance structures for prisoners’ children and families’ in practice; for instance, through the allocation of a statutory organisation in central government responsible for the children and families of prisoners in England and Wales (Williams, Papadopoulou, & Booth, 2012). This absence of top-down accountability creates discord between the pressure placed on family relationships in policy and what might actually be possible in practice. There needs to be critical and reflective approach to supporting families to maintain ties when a mother is sent to prison to avoid causing additional harms to women, children and families who wish to stay connected during the sentence and, as with the sample in this study, are doing everything possible to enable this contact.

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