

A Child with a Parent Serving a Prison Sentence and its Impact on the School Environment

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Original Article

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Abstract:

The school environment is where a child spends the second most amount of time (after the family environment). Leskova (2018, p. 52) claims that “the school and the school environment also play an irreplaceable role in the formation of a child.” Professional authors are largely inclined to claim that having a parent in VTOS has a negative impact on a child’s school results. „The stress caused by a parent being in prison or in VTOS can affect a child’s school performance. Strong emotions and the actions associated with them can result in problems in the classroom and social isolation“ (Chil-

dren of Incarcerated Parents Toolkit, 2022, p. 6). This problem is then the subject of social work, and as Planka et al. (2024, p. 1) state, we use the means of social policy in the school system, which leads “by providing for the social needs of the population and creating conditions for improving the living conditions of individuals and groups.” Having a parent VTOS can affect the child in several areas:

- **Mental health.** The child loses physical contact with the parent, which can be reflected on the psychological side of the individual. Children may experience different feelings such as guilt and sadness. As a result, mental problems in the form of depression and anxiety are created.
- **Social relations.** These relationships can be influenced by the family environment as well as the school environment. In the family environment, the whole family suffers and the child can sense instability in the home environment. Discrimination and ridicule from classmates can occur at school
- **School achievements.** The previous two areas can affect the school area. The family situation can lead to absence from school or failure to fulfill school duties.

According to Slavin (2000, In: McMahon, 2002, p. 5), “children with incarcerated parents are at increased risk of poor school performance, dropping out of school, gang involvement, early pregnancy and drug abuse.” In some cases, the departure of a parent to VTOS can have the opposite, i.e., positive effect on the child. Some children, as well as families, are relieved after the departure of a parent or family member to VTOS. However, as Planka and colleagues (2024, p. 119) point out, whether the situation has improved or deteriorated after the parent’s departure, there must always be communication between the child, the family and the parent in VTOS. “Communication as a process of mutual understanding plays a huge role in all aspects of life - private life, the work environment and interpersonal relationships.” Matejkowski, Johnson and Severson (2014, [cit. 2024-05-22]) add that this fact can also leave children with clinical problems, such as depression and anxiety, problems with attention, disruptive behavior, poor results at school, disruption at home and a reduced likelihood of dealing with anxiety and stress in the future.

Organization and management of research

The main part of the presented professional article is the research part. In our empirical part, we decided to follow the guidelines laid out by Bačíková and Janovská (2018):

1. research objective,
2. research problem and research questions,
3. research sample,

4. research method,
5. data collection and processing,
6. interpretation of the detected data.

Among the first steps, even before the actual implementation of the research, we recommend gaining knowledge from professional literature in addition to knowledge of the researched topic. Theory is important for the implementation of the research part, so the researcher must become

familiar with the topic and the professional literature when writing the theoretical part. Based on the professional literature, we continue with the empirical study, where we define the research problem, the research objective and research questions. Following this is the selection of the research sample or population. The research sample is represented by people who meet the criteria determined by the researcher. The researcher determines the number of people who will make up the sample. After choosing a suitable research sample, we deal with the choice of research methods. As stated by Hendl (2005), the choice of the research method depends on several aspects, namely the acquisition of the necessary information, the selection of suitable persons and the situation under which it will be carried out.

Based on the decision of the selected research (quantitative/qualitative research), the selection of an appropriate method is developed. We most often associate the questionnaire method with quantitative research, which according to Gavor (2010) „is one of the most frequently used methods in research,“; with qualitative research we recommend performing interviews, for example. Eventually we get to the main part of the research, which is data collection and processing. It is necessary to establish contact with the respondents either in person or online - depending on the chosen research method and the topic being researched. We prefer in person meetings when performing interviews, as they allow us to notice other aspects like the behavior of the respondent. We consider it necessary to inform each of the respondents both verbally and by getting informed written consent about the processing of their personal information and the anonymization of data obtained in the interviews. All of the interviews are transcribed. According to Bačiková and Janovská (2018, p. 132), the “transcription of records (e.g., the audio recording of an interview) is usually lengthy, but necessary for further work. The most common form of transcription is verbatim transcription. Its advantage is that no information is lost, and it is available at any time during the analysis. In this way, it is possible to record, for example, peculiarities in the participant’s expression.” We evaluate the obtained data with the help of open coding.

Research objective

Our research objective is as follows. Through the teachers we want to learn what the consequences are of having a parent in VTOS, how it affects the functioning of the child in the educational system, and if these children have the same life experiences.

A research problem

When defining a research problem, it is necessary to pay attention to brevity, clarity and concreteness, as research questions and goals also develop from it. We can say that the entire process of scientific investigation is built on the research problem; it is necessary to constantly stick to the research problem, as Gavora (2010) claims that “only a specific research problem can be investigated”. In the event that the course of our research changes or it is necessary to change it, a change in the research problem is considered. *The research problem in our research is the life experience of three children who have a parent in VTOS. We want to know in which areas teachers see changes in the children. At the same time, we are interested in whether the fact that the children’s parents are in VTOS has an impact on the overall functioning of the given child in the school environment.*

From our research problem, we set the following research question:

How did the family environment (or parent’s imprisonment) affect the functioning of the child in the school environment?

The research sample

Due to the sensitivity of our topic, we decided not to conduct the research with the children themselves, all of whom have a parent in VTOS. We also decided against carrying out the research by dealing with the parents who take care of the children. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the subjects of our research are primary school teachers who can tell us about children with a parent in VTOS. According to Lee Smith (2021), it is important that educators or staff in the school environment had knowledge about the mental health of pupils and the impact mental health has on their performance. The mentioned primary school is located in the district of Malacky.

Considering the strategy of our research and the general lack of information about children with a parent in VTOS, we decided to look for our research sample directly in the given school. We had unverified information about 3 students with a parent in VTOS, and we went to verify this information directly with the given school. The information was confirmed by the teachers. When choosing the people under investigation, we were guided by certain selected criteria:

- at least one of the student's parents must be, or have been in VTOS,
- the intensity of the teacher's contact with the child whose parent is in VTOS,
- the teacher should have gotten to know the student before the parent left for VTOS, and the teacher is also in contact with the student after the parent has left for VTOS.

For the reason mentioned above, the names of the respondents are not mentioned in our research, and the names of the children are fictitious. The respondents in this research will be referred to as: Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4 and Teacher 5. The children in our research will be referred to as Daniel, Sofia and Ema.

Research method

We chose the method of qualitative research, namely interviews. According to Bačíková and Janovská (2018, p. 122), "it is verbal (and non-verbal) interaction between two or more actors." Since there are several types of interviews, we decided on semi-structured interviews, which, according to Gavor (2008), are a compromise between completely scheduled interviews (structured interviews) and free interviews (unstructured interviews). In a semi-structured interview, basic questions are set, and additional questions are also asked during the interview. When conducting our interview, we

followed the recommendations of Bačíková and Janovská (2018):

- plan the place, date and time of the interview,
- plan the areas of interest and interview questions,
- at the beginning of the interview, create a friendly and, above all, trustworthy atmosphere, inform the respondent of the reason for the meeting and briefly introduce the researched topic,
- observe the basics of verbal and non-verbal communication, the questions must be understandable, do not interrupt the respondent...,
- decide on the method of recording the interview,
- at the end, ask the respondent if they have any other information not mentioned so far that they consider important to inform the researcher, thank them for the interview, offer contact and say goodbye.

Collection, processing and analysis of data

Data collection was carried out at one primary school in the district of Malacky. Based on an agreement about the researchers meeting with the respondents, personal meetings were planned at the school. We came to the meeting with the teachers with pre-prepared questions for our research. Before conducting the actual interview, we got to know each teacher and briefly introduced them to the goal of our diploma thesis and the goal of the research. We also familiarized them (as we mentioned above) with the processing of the obtained data.

In the following Table 1, we provide information about the children that the respondents, the educators, told us in our semi-structured interview. Two children - Daniela and Sofia are united by two phenomena; both are in second grade, and each of them has a mother in VTOS. Ema is in first grade and her father is in VTOS.

Table 1 Description of children who met our criteria

Name	Age	The class	A parent who is/was in VTOS
Daniel	14 years	9th grade	mother
Sophia	12 years	6th grade	mother
Emma	8 years	2nd class	father

Source: own processing

Table 2 Description of respondents (educators) who met our criteria

Child's name and case number	Respondent (Teacher)	Number of years of experience of teachers	The length of the child's contact with the teacher	Length of contact of the child with the teacher after the parent leaves the VTOS	The school subject he teaches
Daniel Case no. 1	Teacher 1	44 years	5 years	3 years	Slovak language and the pupil's class teacher
	Teacher 2	5 years	4 years	3 years	biology and geography
Sophia Case no. 2	Teacher 3	35 years	6 years	1 year	art education and physical education
	Teacher 4	2 years	2 years	1 year	mathematics and class teacher
Ema Case no. 3	Teacher 5	6 years	2 years	1 year	class teacher, mathematics, reading, writing

Source: own processing

We divided the children into cases. For better understanding, see Table 2. We had interviews with 4 teachers about Daniel and Sofia. Because they are in second grade, they come into contact with several teachers. Ema is in first grade, so she most often meets her class teacher.

After obtaining the necessary data from the teachers, we could start processing the data. We recorded the data by uploading it to a mobile device. Subsequently, we began to transcribe the interviews verbatim. We analyzed the data using open coding, which according to Kalash et al. (2011, p. 24) is "a key method of qualitative analysis that is applicable to a variety of research styles." Open coding is data analysis that draws attention to concepts and phenomena and then labels and categorizes them through their relatedness and similarity (Strauss and Corbinová, 1999). For this reason, our goal in analyzing the data was to create categories. In our research, we first chose areas of research interest - phenomena that interested us based on the research questions, the research problem, and anything that was revealed to us when studying the transcribed interviews. Based on the resulting phe-

nomena, categories were formed. On the following pages, we will focus on individual cases and analyze the categories that appeared to us while studying the interviews. The categories are:

- behavior
- benefit
- problems

Based on the categories, we will describe each question from the interview, with each teacher and in each case. Category names are indicated by a number, and phenomena are indicated by a letter.

1st category → **Phenomena/factors**

behavior

A - changes in behavior

B - communication

C - spending breaks

D - relationships with peers

2nd category → **Phenomena/factors**

benefit

A - changes in benefit

B - class activity

C - readiness for classes

3rd category —→ **Phenomena/factors**
 problems
 A - absenteeism
 B - dependencies
 C - psychological problems

The results

Based on the stated research question and research objective, we evaluated the conclusions of our qualitative research based on the individual cases. *We were interested in which aspects the respondents (educators) see the change that occurred in the children after the parent left for VTOS.*

Case number 1 (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Daniel)

Based on the statements of Teacher 1, *changes in behavior occurred.* Daniel liked to be the center of attention, had teasing remarks and had conflicts with one classmate that sometimes resulted in fights. Teacher 2 commented that *the changes in behavior* occurred only because Daniel likes attention. Both teachers said that *there were no changes in the benefit* and they consider Daniel to be lazy. Teacher 2 added that Daniel could have 1's and 2's and could use his potential more. Based on the answers of Teachers 1 and 2, we came to the conclusion *that the most critical area for Daniel from the teachers' point of view is clearly behavior*, since there were no changes in his achievement. According to Teacher 1, the departure of Daniel's mother to VTOS *affected Daniel's school attendance*, which was shown by how he neglected the morning lessons. He came to school *tired, and Daniel seemed to have been slightly neglected when it comes to his care.* Teacher 1 also added that Daniel played computer games often, and the reason for this may be that no one paid attention to Daniel during his mother's VTOS. Teacher 2 added that Daniel smokes, but he does not think it is related to his mother's VTOS.

Case number 2 (Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Sofia)

According to the statements of Teacher 3, *the behavior and benefit have not changed.* This is because Ema's grandparents took care of her even when her mother was free. Sofia comes to class prepared, is active and has friends with whom she also spends breaks. Teacher 4 noticed that Sofia had *a sad period* that lasted for about a month, adding that she was *behaving like other children* her age. Teacher 3 also noticed periods

of crying, which he classified as psychological problems. According to Teacher 4, her *benefit is unchanged.*

Through Teachers 3 and 4, we learned that *Ema's achievement and behavior are unchanged.* According to both educators, the behavior was different when Ema was sad and had crying periods.

Case number 3 (Teacher 5, Ema)

According to the statements of Teacher 5, there were no changes in the behavior of Ema after the father's departure to VTOS. Her behavior was specific, but according to the teacher, Ema had this behavior before. Ema never excelled in her grades, and she repeated the first grade twice. *Yet, according to Teacher 5, Ema's father's VTOS affected her grades in a negative way, meaning that this area is more critical.* Teachers 3 and 4 agreed that the grandparents are devoted to Sofia to a great extent. They took care of Sofia even when her mother was not free. Therefore, there were no *fundamental changes in Sofia's school environment.* According to the statements of both teachers, Sofia only had a sad period. Sofia is an exemplary student. She has minimal absences and her grandparents, who look after her, cooperate with the school and are interested in Sofia's work. We encounter a negative influence on the child in the school environment, which is visible especially *when it comes to benefit and absence.* Teacher 5 commented that care is neglected in the family, and this fact *affects Ema at school as well* because she often comes *unprepared* and *absenteeism* is frequent. After the father's departure to VTOS, no one has been *informed about Ema's work at school.* In this case, we can conclude that the family environment affects the child at school.

If we start from the theoretical framework of our study, most authors agree that a child with a parent in VTOS will react negatively, and this can negatively affect their results at school (*Children of Incarcerated Parents Toolkit*, 2022, Slavin, 2000, In: McMahan, 2002). In professional literature, we did not come across a positive statement about the school area of a child with a parent in VTOS.

Considering our qualitative research, we come into conflict with other authors. This is because it is not a rule that a parent in VTOS has

a negative impact on a child in the school environment. In cases 1 and 2, we did not encounter fundamental changes in the children. Sofia had short crying periods and Daniel only showed changes in his behavior. In the last case, we encountered the opposite problem. The VTOS of the father affected the child (Ema) in a negative way.

In our research, we came across the fact that having a parent in VTOS does not necessarily affect the child in a negative way in the school environment. We are of the opinion that if the family environment and ties in the family are firmly established, the child is carefully taken care of and has someone to lean on, there might not be such a threatening impact on the individual. Also important is the fulfilment of family functions that affect family stability - see case 2 (Lehoczka, Zatkova, 2021). According to Šrobárová and Slanicayová (2015), the fulfilment of needs has a significant impact on an individual's social behavior. In case 3 there were strong family ties between Ema and her father, who went to VTOS. The father was the one Ema could lean on. In this case we encounter two problems. The first is the departure of a caring parent and the second will be the return of this parent from VTOS. As Lešková and Haburajová Ilavská (2023) claim, when a convict returns to society, various obstacles arise that the convict must overcome, and one of them is rejection by society. Based on these facts, we conclude that this is the reason for Ema's negative behavior at school at that time. Important aspects include the fulfilment of family functions but also the fulfilment of the child's individual needs, which are largely fulfilled by the family.

Conclusion

The fact that someone from the family is in VTOS is not an easy situation for adult family relatives. It is hard to imagine how their children process this situation and what they are going through. A parent in VTOS can cause vulnerabilities to emerge in children, which may continue to accompany them. Czirák (2022, p. 236) states that social maturity plays a big role here. "Social maturity is a global indicator of how competent an individual is to enter into social interaction and deal with social situations. While social competence is understood as a general human

characteristic, the concept of social maturity is understood as a synthesis of the assessment of social competence attributes in terms of social independence and responsibility."

We think that society forgets about children with this type of fate, and maybe the reason is the low awareness people have about these problems in families. From the point of view of professional literature, only foreign literature deals with the issue of a child with a parent in VTOS to a large extent. So as to not only be negative about this issue, there are organizations and people who try to help, and they have understanding and empathy for these children. Among other things, we recommend cooperation between schools and parents. Children should receive support not only in the family environment, but also in the school environment. This support can mitigate negative impacts and help children to have a better chance of achieving success in school.

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