

# Kids 'condemned to silence'

## Elizabeth Fry Society helps kids whose parents are in prison

BY THERESA MCMANUS, THE RECORD MAY 25, 2012 1:01 PM

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver is spearheading a program aimed at supporting kids who have a parent in prison.

The New Westminster based society has launched the JustKids movement, which is designed to build awareness and support for children with a parent in prison. According to the Elizabeth Fry Society, each day 2,100 Lower Mainland kids have a parent in prison.

"There is a lot of stigma, a lot of judgment," said Shawn Bayes, the society's executive director.

"Children are condemned to silence. They can't talk about it."

According to Bayes, children may be reluctant to talk about their family situation because they don't want people to judge their parents, or they may fear their parent's incarceration may reflect on them. In addition, children may have a lot of fear about the place where their parent is incarcerated, as cartoons often depict prisons as dungeonlike places.

"The information they get about that is their parent is being tortured. It is a very scary thing," she said.

"They have a very high rate of mental illness, they have a high level of lower academic achievement."

Through JustKids, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver is seeking participation from social service organizations, governments and individuals across Canada. Although the society can't help all 2,100 Lower Mainland kids who have a parent behind bars - let alone the more than 250,000 across Canada - it's launched JustKids to invite others to join it in helping to break the legacy of crime.

According to the Elizabeth Fry Society, more than 60 per cent of children with parents in prison will end up behind bars if they don't receive programs and services to support them. The society wants to inform people in the education, medical and child-welfare systems about its research and about program models that exist elsewhere for dealing with these children - so people working in those systems are better able to respond to the children and their caregivers and have the tools needed to support those children.

"What we are looking to do is raise the topic," Bayes said. "We have done a tremendous amount of research. We want to share that research."

Bayes said programs offered in other countries have shown positive results for children whose parents are in prison. She pointed to Sweden as one example.

"The children of prisoners have no poorer incomes than if your parent was divorced or your parent died," she said about the research. "That means something can be done."

Through the JustKids initiative, the society is offering to share its knowledge on how to operate successful support programs such as its summer camps, Saturday Club and storybook program.

"We chose the name JustKids to emphasize that while children with a parent in the justice system need support, at the end of the day, they are just kids," Bayes said. "As adults, we believe it is our duty to help them grown into happy, contributing adults."

Last year, the Elizabeth Fry Society introduced summer camps to support kids whose parents are in prison. Some of the feedback was heartbreaking.

"Kids wrote - and not just one - that they made their first friend," Bayes said. "For me that really came down to why we run the summer camps. It's the first time for many children to be with other kids like them. No one is going to judge them."

Last year, 120 children attended camps that were offered in New Westminster, Surrey and Vancouver.

The success of the summer camps led to the Saturday Club, which is a program for kids that's offered in Burnaby. Offered on Saturdays, the club's aim is to focus on literacy so kids can do well in school.

Through the story time program, the society gets parents in prison to read stories to their children.

The audiotapes are then sent to their children.

"It lets them know their parent is OK. It maintains that contact," Bayes said, noting children may feel they've been abandoned by their parent. "It's comforting for them to hear that voice."

The story time program is currently offered through Fraser Valley Institution, Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, Surrey Pretrial, as well as facilities in Nanaimo and Prince George.

"Our work is childfocused - what is in the best interests of the children," she said of the programs.

Ultimately, said Bayes, the goal is to provide children of prisoners with the support and skills needed to give them healthier outcomes and to stop the cycle of family involvement in the criminal justice system.

According to Bayes, Canada is the only country in the British Commonwealth that doesn't recognize and support children with a parent in prison.

In addition to breaking the legacy of crime by helping children whose parents are in prison, the Elizabeth Fry Society believes society benefits by keeping these kids out of the justice system - including creating safer communities and saving tax dollars.

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