

The INCCIP Youth Ambassadors 2019.

A short report by Dr Lorna Brookes.

In 2019, at The University of Huddersfield, the first INCCIP Youth Ambassadors group was formed.

This group comprised of 8 young people; Anye from the USA, Olivia, Kaitlin, Alex and Ethan from England, EJ from Scotland, and Joni and Brandon from the Isle of Man. Their ages ranged from 12 to 18yrs. All young people consented to being in photos and videos and their thoughts shared.

The young people gathered together on the evening of the first conference day, Monday 12th August for dinner, and it was utterly heart-warming to witness an immediate bond and acceptance between the group.

On the morning of day 2 of the conference, Tuesday 13th August, the young people took part in a closed group, which lasted for an hour and half, where they shared stories and feelings about their experiences of parental imprisonment and decided as a group what key messages they wanted to highlight in the conference. (Unfortunately, Brandon had to depart at this stage as he was returning home for a family day visit with his mother). The rest of the youth took their discussion points into a live panel which was held in front of the entire conference delegation. This panel discussion lasted approximately 1.5 hours.

The key issues the INCCIP youth ambassadors agreed upon were:

1. To express what young people don't want / what is not helpful.
2. To share experiences of being young carers.
3. To discuss negative experiences of the media.
4. To express their concerns about gaps in support.
5. To express their hopes for the future.

Overall theme

The group decided that their workshop title / theme should be a drawing of a question mark. They chose the question mark symbol because they wanted to express how they have so many questions when a parent goes to prison, how so much needs to be answered, and how there is so much for other people to learn. They also wanted to audience to feel able to ask them questions should they wish.

NB: It was possible to obtain some clips of the panel discussion. Records from these are given verbatim.

Summary of Panel Discussion.

1. What young people don't want

The young people were invited to complete the sentence “*I don't want....*”

Some things they said they did not want included:

- Pity
- For other people (without personal experience) to ask them about what prison is like.
- Don't ask us what our parent did. Many of us don't know and don't want to discuss it if we do.
- Don't embarrass us in school. We might want support but please be subtle as we don't want to stand out to other children.
- Don't put our parents name in the press.

2. Experiences of Being Young Carers:

Many of the children discussed finding themselves in a caring capacity when their parent went to prison.

One young person shared her story of extreme neglect when her mother went to prison. She explained that she and her younger siblings were abandoned in a house; that they lived off dried peanuts, did not attend school and that they were trying to care for their baby sister who was just weeks old. She explained that they lived like this for around 6 months and that at 8 years old she was the eldest of four children in this situation.

Another child explained how she became the carer for her great grandmother who she was placed with when her mother went to prison, and another explained how she fell into a caring role for siblings. It was clear that becoming young carers, for many, was inextricably linked to parental imprisonment.

3. Negative experiences of the Media

Much of this section was captured and therefore the notes are shown as direct quotes from the young people.

“What gives you the right to completely exploit my entire life in the media? The media really took a toll upon us at that time. The media needs to understand we are children! In society we are babies - I don't want people putting my address in the papers - I want to get an education so I can be where I want to be in life. I don't want you (the media) telling people where I live so I can be absolutely traumatised. Let me have my stability!!”

Don't exploit it (my stability) and make things bigger than it needs to be" (Liv, aged 18yrs).

The media will put out their rules and regulations and find a way to defend themselves - they will always find a little loop hole where they are bending it - but not breaking it. If you're allowed to put a child in danger how can you (the media) put a child's name, how old they are, where they live, what they look like - because they have a picture. It's one of those things where they (the media) believe - oh you're a criminal so you're a danger to society - so they put a picture out there so people are wary. But you could get accused of something that you haven't even done. And you will be put in a category of what you've done and you're not allowed in certain places, not allowed to do certain things. My dad - he had to go through an entire assessment with children. My dad got convicted of a sexual crime. We don't believe he did it. It's not in his nature. But the media they put his name, and his last name in the paper. My mum and dad are married by the way. I'm adopted by my dad so that means he could find me. The one thing that stood out to me - this is stereotypical is that they wrote "tattooed man" as if all people with tattoos are bad. Well they're not. My big brother has tattoos all over and he is the loveliest person you could ever meet. Right now, he is over in Australia and in a few months he will be a fully-fledged forensic psychologist and he's got tattoos. No one see's him different because they don't care (Ethan, aged 14 yrs).

I wanted to add - about the tattoo thing that you've just hit upon... I wanted to talk about what I've gone through with the media. Obviously their job is to sell stories - but its completely ridiculous. My step father was in the paper and it was written as a racist attack. But it wasn't a racist attack - he's not racist at all. My grandmother is a black woman and my mum is mixed race. But it's how they sell papers. They take small details and blow it completely out of all proportion (Liv, aged 18 yrs).

4. Gaps in Support

All the young people felt that support groups were valuable and needed to be more readily accessible for all young people affected by parental imprisonment. One child from the Isle of Man spoke passionately about the lack of support in her area:

In the Isle of Man we have no support groups. We have children's centres but we have no support groups like this. But the support group that I've met here.. I've met any of these lot yesterday - I'd never met any of them before and they are all so bright - but kids in the isle of Man they don't have support groups. I've only ever met Brandon and he's gone home because he's spending time with his mum tomorrow in the day - and it's not that we want it - we need it. Because there are all these kids across the

island that can't express themselves like other people can internationally and stuff. They bottle their emotions up and they can't express the fact that they are angry, upset, emotional all the time like other people can. If there was a support group on the Isle of Man, it would be somewhere that kids could express their emotions with other kids. Like here we bounce off each other's energy and we can't do that in the Isle of Man. I've known a few other kids who've had parents in prison but they can't express themselves. And now I think about it, I think what if they had a support group, where they could express themselves to whoever. They could make new friends and see other people's points of views; have new ideas on how to get through the situation. But coming to this support group in the UK - if I wanted to come over it would involve flying over. But if we had one in the Isle of Man I would be able to stay where I'm from and have a talk and go home. But at the moment it would be getting a flight, taking trains, its loads of money. The Isle of Man wants and support group and they also need a support group (Rhian, aged 12).

5. Hopes for the future:

Each of the 7 panellists finished with a hope they had for the future.

1. *For the Isle of Man to get support groups*
2. *World Wide Change in the way we treat kids with a parent in prison in general. They have their own thoughts and opinions, and there should be a lot more young people who can be part of the change.*
3. *The children who don't get support finally get what they need.*
4. *For an international support group to actually be made. Some countries probably don't have support groups and they need it because it will be affecting them as much as it will be affecting us.*
5. *The parents that are in prison not to feel like they have failed us as a parent. At the end of the day they brought us into the world and we are thankful for that.*
6. *I hope for success for all of us sat here. We all deserve the world. I can't stress to you all enough that you all are so amazing, and what we have all been through we all deserve so much. We deserve the world and we are all going to do so well. I want to go on to do counselling with children who have been through a similar thing to me. I want to help people who are living in poverty and going through neglect.*
7. *I hope we finally get society to shift their perspective about people who have made a mistake and who have had their punishment. So that people who have made their mistake and have gone through their time that that be their punishment and not be completely written off because it is not right. We are all worthy of forgiveness. Everyone is worthy of forgiveness. Because we all human at the end of the day.*

The youth ambassadors were then met with a standing ovation from the conference delegates and their contribution was hailed as possibly the most powerful and significant of the conference.

The youth then enjoyed a youth outing in the afternoon and came back into the conference for the conference dinner on the Tuesday evening. This concluded the youth programme.