Focus on Children –
The challenge to reflect on values with imprisoned extremist parents

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Practitioners

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of projects in Europe concentrating on parents in prison, their children or both. Most of the projects focus on strengthening parenting competence and encouraging bonds and communication between imprisoned parents and their children.

Präfix R, established in 2015 in Berlin, Germany, is a coaching programme for imprisoned parents, and is one of the few projects that combines a reflection on parenting values with deradicalisation interventions. Through a new concept, Präfix R aims to initiate effects in the framework of early radicalisation prevention, particularly with respect to children. As developers and implementers of this programme, the authors would like to share the experiences and challenges of the past 5 years. These, alongside experience gained from working with detained parents in other projects, formed the foundation for a collection of lessons learned and conclusions, and shaped the definition of the conducive conditions to enable and support the implementation of these measures. This may inspire other practitioners and policymakers to create similar programmes.

Even though the authors' work is primarily concerned with parents holding right-wing extremist attitudes, some of its elements are applicable to any form of extremism. Especially considering the continuing debate on returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their family members from battlegrounds in Syria and Iraq, these experiences need to be taken into account when planning comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration measures. Many adults who joined Daesh and have since returned or will do so in future are likely to be imprisoned for a certain period. These parents will find it extremely difficult to maintain a supportive relationship with their children. Furthermore, parents holding both right-wing extremist attitudes and Islamist extremist beliefs often deeply distrust democratic systems and commonly transfer their own values to their children. In other words, the children of (former) Daesh members frequently grow up in families holding extremist beliefs and a society built on an ideological system that devaluates and hurts others.

Leveraging the experiences of work with children of extremist and imprisoned parents in other contexts, for both rehabilitation and child welfare, can provide important support to practitioners working with returned FTFs and their family members. However, given the renewed attention to right-wing extremism (RWE) in EU Member States and a related likely rise in prisoners connected to RWE, this paper should also continue to serve those seeking to develop new approaches for this target group.

Background

Family dynamics and relationships amongst family members are influencing factors in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). A key strategy in radicalisation prevention involves addressing family structures [1]: shaping attitudes, norms and values; identifying signs of extremist ideologies; and intervening in actual radicalisation [2] processes.

Working with parents in the context of deradicalisation seems logical considering their function as role models for their children (although further research is needed to better understand the impact a parent has on a child in terms of extremist attitudes) [3]. A good bond with one's parents is crucial for a child's well-being.

However, families can also be a harmful influence and can exacerbate anti-democratic, violent thinking behaviour [4]. This can be especially challenging if the parent holds extremist views, has had difficult bonding experiences, has suffered violence or has been neglected themselves, as these factors can result in the traumatic experiences being transmitted. A relationship with an extremist parent might be damaging for a child, for instance when a parent instrumentalises a child for acts in extremist scenes or when the parental extremist beliefs jeopardise the child's conception of the world.

In critical situations, professionals are obliged to closely monitor the child's well-being. In rare cases, it might be necessary to evaluate whether maintaining contact with a parent is causing more harm to the child than

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[1] Global Counterterrorism Forum, *Initiative to address the life cycle of radicalization to violence. The role of families in preventing and countering violent extremism: Strategic recommendations and programming options*.
[2] In this paper, the term *radicalisation* refers to violent, extremist, and anti-democratic ideologies.
[3] Sikkens et al., Parents' Perspectives on Radicalization: A qualitative study.
[4] Sikkens et al., Parental Influence on Radicalization and de-radicalization according to the lived experiences of former extremists and their families.

separation, which can likewise have far-reaching consequences for a child's emotional state. This is also why imprisonment, which results in a separation between parent and child, can have both a positive and a negative impact. However, children's well-being prior to their parents' incarceration has not really been evaluated, to date.

Maintaining a good relationship between parent and child is particularly difficult when the parent is imprisoned, as this often results in the child's suffering manifesting through physical or mental health issues. For example, these children are often exposed to bullying due to their particular family situations. Moreover, affected children are at risk of displaying similar behaviour to that of their parents and of committing criminal offences [5].

This paper provides insights and advice to practitioners working with parents (in prison) to stabilise their relationships with their children and improve their parenting skills. It includes parents convicted for terrorist crimes as well as parents (in prison) who are at risk of radicalisation.

Considering that there are an estimated 2.1 million children separated from a parent in prison in Council of Europe countries, there is clearly a need to tackle this issue [6]. Different strategies are used across the EU Member States; generally, the focus is on working with and supporting family members/parents, either within the prison context or in the actual field of prevention of radicalisation. Rarely is the support of family members or parents within the prison system linked to prevention of radicalisation. The need to address this gap is evident in view of the parents with (right-wing) extremist attitudes imprisoned due to the general rise of RWE within EU Member States, not to mention the rising number of people with extremist Islamist beliefs returning from combat zones, many of whom will be parents facing incarceration [7].

In the COPING study, one of the few scientific studies on this topic, affected children in England, Germany, Romania and Sweden were interviewed between 2010 and 2012 [8]. Results repeatedly reveal that children avoid talking about the imprisoned parent due to fear of stigmatisation and exclusion; they tend to be withdrawn and may be cast as the outsider or be exposed to bullying. Three quarters of the children report negative consequences of the parental imprisonment, especially in regard to their family atmosphere and financial situation. They also experience significantly more psychological and physical problems (such as sleep disorders and abdominal pain) than the control group. They more often experience behavioural problems such as distancing from school or aggressive reactions. Nearly half the children also describe themselves as sad and angry at times, especially in the period immediately after imprisonment, and they report feelings of helplessness and anger. Moreover, children of offenders run the risk of being punished for the parental behaviour, while at the same time receiving little support from others. The results of this study underline the need to take these children and their needs and vulnerabilities into account much more robustly than previously, especially in the P/CVE context.

There are initial political approaches premised not only on the perspective of children's rights (UN Human Rights Convention) but that also address children of imprisoned parents as an independent vulnerable target group in child and youth welfare. These approaches call for the development of further support measures and no longer consider them only as a component of judicial assistance [9].

Psychologist Alain Bouregba from the network Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE) emphasises the importance for the child of maintaining good contact with the imprisoned parent. Especially in such exceptional situations, he considers a stable and reliable relationship with both parents to be crucial for developing a stable self-image. The child needs to feel that the parent in prison is still there for them. It is important to prevent or interrupt a potential transgenerational transmission of 'life stories', the feelings of guilt and shame, and a fatalistic view of the world [10].

Various experts researching radicalisation processes repeatedly emphasise that radicalisation towards extremist attitudes and behaviour, combined with inhuman and violent attitudes, are to be understood as

[5] See Roggenthin, *Kinder Inhaftierter – Vom Verschiebebahnhof aufs Präventionsgleis* and Walker, *Parenting from a distance. Your Rights and Responsibilities.*
[6] Children of Prisoners Europe, *Annual Report 2019.*
[7] Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Right-wing extremism on the rise?*
[8] Bieganski et al., *Kinder von Inhaftierten: Auswirkungen. Risiken. Perspektiven. Ergebnisse und Empfehlungen der COPING-Studie.*
[9] Holthusen & Struck, Kinder von Inhaftierten, p. 36.
[10] See: https://childrenofprisoners.eu/the-issues/fathers-in-prison

'social processes' that can be influenced by many variables at the macro, meso and micro levels ([11]). Many children (especially at younger ages) do not have a violent, ideological understanding of radicalisation or a closed world view, but can become very insecure following a parent's imprisonment and the accompanying repercussions (e.g. loss of attachment, shift in family dynamics and economic changes). As a long-term consequence, they develop attitudes and behavioural dispositions that are likely to have an adverse prognosis ([12]). The older the child, the more likely it is that surrounding attitudes will become entrenched in their world views. Therefore, the age of the child has to be taken into consideration when planning intervention measures.

As a result of the transgenerational transmission of one's own bonding experiences (e.g. disorganised experiences of attachment), ideological attitude patterns and experiences of violence can be passed on from parent to child. Authoritarian and hostile ways of thinking at home can be identified as 'direct role models' ([13]). This also applies to the quality of parent–child relationships ([14]). The influence of parents is also notable for the pre-political sphere (i.e. for selecting conflict resolution strategies, dealing with unfamiliarity, learning to tolerate ambiguity and questioning rigid gender stereotypes).

Projects for imprisoned parents in Europe: Insights

In general, family/parental support in prison seeks to strengthen the relationship between affected family members by considering their individual needs. Overall, these types of projects engage with three categories: 1) the imprisoned parents, 2) their children, or 3) both. Since so few examples of such programmes exist in the P/CVE context, the following cases should serve as valuable lessons for the rehabilitation and reintegration of imprisoned extremist parents.

1) Target group: imprisoned parents

Some programmes primarily target the imprisoned parent, providing support in individual or group meetings. The focal point may be to exercise and address parental responsibilities and feelings. The parent learns to comprehend the impact of their imprisonment on the child.

Before working with imprisoned parents, it is helpful to learn about their motivation for and willingness to deal with parenthood. If all the practitioners of a multi-agency framework assess that there is insufficient willingness of a prisoner to cooperate and work on change or at least reflection, the plan should be reconsidered: it may make more sense to work with the parent at another point in time.

When working with an imprisoned extremist parent, the disadvantages and negative effects faced by the child (because of the parent and/or their ideologies and involvement in the extremist scene) can be elaborated in a participative manner. Alternative democratic ways of thinking should be demonstrated and worked on. The child's positive development can serve as a motivational factor for the parent to change their own attitudes and behaviours.

This work can take place in a regular meeting space, so as to facilitate sharing between incarcerated parents. Depending on the objectives, situation and individuals taking part in a group meeting, participants may include either generally interested incarcerated parents or only radicalised parents. Collectively, the affected parents will develop a sense of the common difficulties faced while separated from their children.

([11]) See, for example, della Porta, Can democracy be saved?; Quent, *Rassismus, Radikalisierung, Rechtsterrorismus*; McCauley & Moskalenko, Mechanisms of political radicalization.
([12]) See, for example, Sroufe et al., *The development of the person: The Minnesota study of risk and adaptation from birth to adulthood*.
([13]) Rippl, Eltern-Kind-Transmission. Einflussfaktoren zur Erklärung von Fremdenfeindlichkeit im Vergleich.
([14]) See Hopf et al., *Familie und Rechtsextremismus* and Wahl, *Skinheads, Neonazis, Mitläufer*.

Project example

Project name: Let's talk about children

Organisation: Mental health for strength and empowerment (MIELI)

Location: Helsinki, Finland

Description: Originally, the programme did not address incarcerated parents. It has since been further developed specifically for prison use ([15]). The aim of the project is to build a shared understanding between parents, the child, and other important persons in the child's life, and to find ways of working together to promote well-being and prevent problems. A professional works with the parent to depict the child's ordinary day in all developmental contexts. In the next step, they create an action plan to enhance identified strengths and support vulnerabilities.

2) Target group : children with parents at home

Some programmes focus on the children of imprisoned parents. Addressing the feelings of children whose parents are incarcerated is a crucial aspect of the support. In various creative ways, children are encouraged to express themselves. Child-friendly books and apps have been created to explain the prison systems and the emotional ambivalences the children might contend with. Online services play an important role: they ensure the children (and especially teenagers) have anonymous access to support structures. Holiday camps employing an experience-oriented approach provide exchange opportunities and entertainment for children of incarcerated parents.

Children of extremist incarcerated parents can be supported to find ways to deal with the ambiguity of loving their parents and opposing their extremist attitudes or criminal offence(s). Should the children adopt the extremist ideologies themselves, the focus can be shifted to their own world views and roots, and the consequences for their own futures. Strategies entail building alternative relationships and addressing democratic values ([16]). This includes accepting multiple ways of thinking and being able to formulate their own opinions. Depending on the age of the children, the use of (playful) methods must be adapted appropriately.

Project example

Organisation: Childline

Location: United Kingdom

Description: Childline is a telephone/online counselling service for anyone under the age of 19 in the UK that offers help with all issues experienced by children and young people. Childline has a website for children and young people whose parents are imprisoned: children and young people can access all sorts of information on their situations, feelings, thoughts and struggles.

3) Target group: both parents and children

Some programmes aim to improve and strengthen the relationship between parent and child. On a political level, organisations advocate for family-friendly structures in prisons. Several prisons have scheduled certain days on which parents can meet their children routinely, to counteract social alienation. Other projects foster communication between child and parent by encouraging the exchange or posting of letters, photos or recorded book readings.

According to attachment theory, individuals with negative bonding experiences have increased vulnerability to extremist ideologies ([17]). Therefore, strengthening and supporting the relationship between children and

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([15]) Radicalisation Awareness Network, *The role of family and social networks in the rehabilitation of (violent) extremist and terrorist offenders.*
([16]) Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Vulnerable children who are brought up in an extremist environment.*
([17]) Hopf, Muster der Repräsentation von Bindungserfahrungen und rechtsextreme Orientierungen.

extremist imprisoned parents in a supervised manner (e.g. guided pedagogical games, followed by a reflection procedure) seems relevant for prevention of radicalisation.

Project example

Organisation: Relais Enfants-Parents

Location: Brussels and Wallonia (Belgium)

Description: Relais Enfant-Parents strives to support, strengthen, and if necessary, restore the link between a child and their detained parent. Their work includes preparation meetings before the first meeting in prison, accompanying the children on individual visits with a psychologist, and organising regular group visits where several parents meet their children at the same time, in an attempt to provide a warm, lively meeting space.

Familial/parental support in preventing radicalisation

The importance of family support in preventing radicalisation to terrorism and violent extremism is highlighted in the multiple approaches and projects across the EU Member States, as recorded in the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices [18]. Two categorisation models are considered suitable in the context of prevention of radicalisation. Firstly, Gerald Caplan's primary, secondary and tertiary prevention model entails timing the interventions differently. The second model, developed by Robert S. Gordon, distinguishes between universal, selective and indicated prevention measures. In contrast to Caplan's approach, the characteristics and development processes of the target group are decisive [19].

Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between direct and indirect measures. While direct measures are aimed at young people at risk of radicalisation or those directly affected, indirect measures address people who interact closely with the person concerned.

The following specifications referring to the parental work are classified as indirect measures.

Primary and universal prevention measures

Primary prevention measures are implemented before a problem situation arises. Universal prevention actions are directed towards every parent, regardless of the behaviour and attitude of their children. This can include general awareness-raising workshops, strengthening parent–child dialogue, enhancing parenting skills or further developing the parental understanding of democracy.

Secondary and selective prevention measures

Secondary prevention measures are designed to prevent the crystallisation of already-present unwanted signs that have emerged. Selective prevention targets the group in which certain risk factors have already been identified. Pedagogical work in the form of family support groups or individual counselling can be directed at parents whose families or children are at risk owing to unstable dynamics caused by multiple factors like frustration, grievances, cultural discrimination or a history of sexualised violence.

Tertiary or indicated prevention measures

The challenge for tertiary prevention is that it is implemented after an unwanted action or situation has already occurred. This prevention is aimed at parents whose children have already undergone a radicalisation process. It may include intensive counselling for parents, which can be especially challenging as the relation between parents and children is often dysfunctional and troubled. Ideally, parents receive advice on how best to support their children in the distancing process.

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[18] Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing radicalisation to terrorism and violent extremism.*
[19] Ceylan & Kiefer, *Salafismus: Fundamentalistische Strömungen und Radikalisierungsprävention,* p. 110.

Project Präfix R – an example of a multi-perspective approach

The Präfix R project is relatively unique in combining both familial/parental support in prison and familial/parental support in preventing radicalisation. Through a special coaching programme with imprisoned parents, Präfix R seeks to prevent the tendency for (right-wing) radicalisation in their children (**indirect prevention measure**).

Regardless of their ideological or political attitude, any parents wishing to consolidate or stabilise the relationship with their children and improve their parenting skills are welcome to participate.

The coaching is suitable for parents:

- who are right-wing extremist oriented and might transfer their attitudes to their children (**direct and indirect / primary and universal prevention / secondary and selective prevention**);

- who do not hold extremist views, but have noticed their teenage children's tendency towards discriminatory prejudices or towards joining right-wing extremist groups (**indirect / secondary and selective prevention**).

The coaching is focused on:

- supporting clients to strengthen the parent–child relationship;

- improving parental child-raising competence;

- reflecting on values and attitudes.

As the coaching is based on the systemic approach, coaches seek to involve significant others who can support the process, such as (ex-)partners, (foster) parents, friends or relatives. Looking at the two working fields and their subcategories, the Präfix R project covers several aspects of familial/parental support in prison as well as familial/parental support in preventing radicalisation. The project works with imprisoned parents and is mainly situated in indirect, primary and universal prevention; since the children of incarcerated parents can be viewed as a general risk group, it can also be classified as secondary and selective prevention. However, as the coaching directly addresses parents who hold right-wing extremist views, it is considered direct prevention work, as well. That is, in its work with imprisoned parents (direct target group) in a coaching setting, Präfix R also focuses on children (indirect target group) as a vulnerable group. All in all, it turns out that the project cannot be easily categorised using existing models. The fact that all these different aspects intersect make Präfix R a distinct and rare case in the EU Member State project landscape.

Taking all of this into account, we classify the approach of Präfix R predominantly as one of primary prevention in the field of radicalisation-prevention work, and regard radicalisation processes as 'open' rather than synonymous with the 'extremism concept' ([20]).

A parent's imprisonment can function as a trigger for their children to develop cognitive and behavioural radicalisation or aggressive behaviour, especially if other risk factors are added, such as mobbing experiences at school or peer group dynamics with ideological/religious attitudes. Under certain circumstances, this can lead to the reproduction of extremist ideas and racist attitudes, as RWE research has shown ([21]), or initiate an increasing questioning of social norms and values and an associated willingness to fight institutions and individuals.

Without following a linear causality between the process of radicalisation and terrorism, we consider the bond between children and parents (close reference persons) as well as the transfer of transgenerational ideological attitudes and actions to be crucial indicators of radicalisation processes. This is where the Präfix R programme comes in, providing early intervention to prevent radicalisation.

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[20] Baaken et al., *Herausforderung Deradikalisierung*.
[21] Köttig, *Lebensgeschichten rechtsextrem orientierter Mädchen und junger Frauen*.

At the same time, we take into account the findings of deradicalisation research (²²). Consequently, the Präfix R approach can be classified as secondary prevention, since coaches use targeted deradicalisation and disengagement interventions to (gender-)critically reflect on and disrupt attitudinal and behavioural patterns with participants in a targeted manner. Through the combination of radicalisation and primary and secondary prevention, the Präfix R approach can be interpreted as multi-perspective: it combines interventions for deradicalisation of imprisoned parents with interventions for radicalisation prevention of their children.

We are guided by the hypothesis that imprisoned parents — regardless of their political and ideological attitudes — naturally have an interest in the positive development of their children, and we use this interest to set distancing impulses or strengthen existing ones.

Goals of parent coaching in prison

Our experience has shown that the main objectives for parent coaching in prison through intensive pedagogical and therapeutic work are as follows:

a. to protect their children from taking on radical inhumane positions, prejudiced narratives and racist attitudes; from turning to a radicalised group; or from committing crimes;

b. to accompany and support participants in a sense of empowerment, to enable them to define their roles as a father or mother (in prison), and to help them develop their child-raising competence.

These objectives and the descriptions set out below can serve as guiding principles and a useful toolkit for practitioners working with parents for P/CVE. They could be especially promising for professionals counselling returning FTFs. Of course, all this applies only to parents who are willing to reflect on their extremist attitudes and values. Therefore, it is crucial to select the participants carefully and involve all important stakeholders in this process.

The setting

Experience has shown that it makes sense to structure the coaching process as follows: 2 preliminary talks; 10 sessions; and after the process is complete, 1 or 2 follow-up meetings. Their timings should be determined in agreement with the participants. After all, it is important to stay flexible in terms of the number of sessions being offered, according to the situation and the resources of the coaches. The coaching could be extended to up to 20 sessions, especially for complex cases, e.g. if the father or mother is referred later on to an exit programme.

Compulsory or voluntary participation?

In general, the intention is to enable parents to make an independent and conscious decision to participate. Therefore, the pre-session conversation is crucial for clarifying parental motivation and ascertaining whether there is potential to transform possible extrinsic motivating factors (e.g. hope for early release or increased parental rights) into intrinsic motivation. Moreover, should prison administrations decide to make the programme compulsory, the coaches would persistently search for a willingness to change – at least a first step in this direction should be recognised before beginning the process.

(²²) On push and pull factors, see RAN's 2019 *Extremism, radicalisation & mental health: Handbook for Practitioners* and 2017 *UNODC Annual Report.*

Topic modules

Module 1: Target development and establishment of the work alliance

As therapy research has shown, a good relationship between counsellor and client is the main factor in a successful coaching process [23]. Therefore, an open-minded and appreciative attitude is a basic prerequisite for the coach. In addition, ensuring and maintaining confidentiality is particularly important in the prison context. A further focus of this module is the participative formulation of goals.

Module 2: Biography work – identity and gender images

The biography work module requires the client to reflect on their own childhood experiences to initiate the healing process. Biography work builds and strengthens identity and self-esteem and gives purpose and significance to clients by helping them to understand their experiences, and to focus on resources that were available during childhood. A part of this process includes reflecting on one's own identity constructions and gender images. This is especially important in the context of prisons and extremist scenes, as men and women are confronted with extremely rigid gender roles [24].

Module 3: Parental presence – participants in their role as father/mother

In this module, clients reflect on educational ideas and values. Teaching the developmental psychology basics of infancy and toddlerhood is always important when the coaches notice that the children's (re)actions are misinterpreted. Another crucial topic is rage and anger management. Reflecting on parental presence in this context means identifying how reliably the parents are involved in caring for the child(ren) and how they can maintain or intensify contact during their imprisonment. The issue of how the partnership can be shaped is closely related to this.

Module 4: Reflection of norms and values

Reflection on the values that give meaning to one's life and influence parental style is a theme running throughout the entire coaching process. Young people who turn to radicalised groups are often brought up with an understanding of a clear distinction between 'us' and 'the others' [25]. These attitudes are passed on as unquestioned norms and are likely to later appear in the form of xenophobic, racist, homophobic positions.

Systemically speaking, instructive interaction is not possible, i.e. no-one can be forced to change beliefs and values. Practitioners question the statements [26] and employ approaches that are suitable for making clients think and reconsider, and elicit doubts and questions about ideologised interpretations.

Module 5: Family session

A joint session can be held in the final third part of the coaching. In agreement with the parents, significant people from their environment are invited to participate. Together with the responsible social worker of the youth welfare office, the process is reviewed, steps for change are assessed, open questions and mutual expectations and wishes are discussed, and support measures are determined.

Module 6: Evaluation and conclusion of the coaching

The coaching is concluded on the one hand by an evaluation of the goals, and on the other by planning for the short-term and long-term future. Follow-up meetings can be scheduled. Not only do these sessions help

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[23] Flückiger et al., Bedeutung der Arbeitsallianz in der Psychotherapie.
[24] Bourdieu, *Die männliche Herrschaft*; Connell, *Masculinities*.
[25] Rieker, Ethnozentrismus im Jugendalter, p. 45.
[26] Osborg, Der konfrontative Ansatz der subversiven Verunsicherungspädagogik.

to maintain the bond between coach and participant, but they also enable the clients to remain in touch with their goals and be reminded of what they have achieved.

Attitude reflection – an excursion into practice

The following excerpt from a coaching session illustrates concretely how work is carried out on the reflection of values and attitudes.

This sequence was part of the coaching with 34-year-old Daniel ([27]), a father of 2 children (a boy aged 4 and a daughter aged 7), who was sentenced to 2 years for spreading symbols of anti-constitutional organisations. Daniel very openly stated at the beginning of the session that he identified as a 'German-nationalist'. During the coaching process, he repeatedly expressed his rigid understanding of gender orders and ideas of what he considered 'normal'. Sexist and homophobic attitudes are essential components of (right-wing) extremist attitudes and are often neglected in preventive and deradicalisation measures. At the same time, it is often partial elements of the overarching extremist mindset that also lead to targeted violence and target selection, homophobia being one of them.

In this fifth session of the counselling process, the coach decided to take a closer look at the topic, when Daniel mentioned that he heard in the news that more and more same-sex couples wish to have children. This following is just one excerpt of a conversation that forms part of the larger counselling and trust-building process. Incorporating critical conversations, even on seemingly small issues such as perceptions of gender norms and sexuality, is an essential part of the overarching aim to reflect and overcome extremist mind-sets. Very often, even in the case of violent offenders with extremist beliefs, tackling such specific topics provides a critical entrance point to a substantial cognitive and behavioural opening.

Daniel: 'Well, I don't think every person should have the right to get married and have a family.'

Coach: 'What do you mean?'

Daniel: 'People who are gay are not normal. It's all a matter of how they grew up.'

Coach: 'I don't understand exactly, would you like to tell me more about it?'

Daniel: 'Well, I'll give you an example. The brother of my wife's sister-in-law grew up with four sisters. She told me that they have always been playing together, getting dressed up, doing girl stuff. He even put on make-up. He started to love this very much. So he turned out to be gay. Being surrounded by all these women all day and all these years, he must become gay.'

Coach: 'You don't mean people fall in love with whom they feel attracted to, and it's perhaps a coincidence whom you love? Perhaps it just happens, and it feels very normal to them?'

Daniel: 'No, I don't agree, this is disgusting. It's because they got socialised like that, something pressed them to become… – yes actually I think it's sick, it's abnormal.'

Coach: 'But tell me, this is really something I would like to know – what if one of your kids told you one day they were gay? Let's say your son would be 18 and tell you that he fell in love with a young man. What would you do?'

Daniel: 'He never will, he wouldn't dare, I guess. No, definitely I wouldn't allow it.'

Coach: 'So you would force him to hide this important part of his life from you? All his life he would miss your recognition, your …'

Daniel: 'No he wouldn't, because… it's my son… he simply can't be… gay.'

While he obviously – although denying it very decisively – allowed this picture to get into his mind, he turned away, looked out of the window, became pale. He showed that it was extremely hard for him to bear this idea.

([27]) Name and other data are anonymised.

Coach: 'I can see, it's hard to imagine, it's obviously a challenge… Well, I think you love your kids very much and you wish them the best for their lives, and you work very hard to be a good parent for them – as I could see in the sessions we had by now. What I can see now is on one side, there is so much love and appreciation for your kids. You want them to be happy and have a family – like you wished to have a family. And on the other hand, you don't allow them to be themselves, to create their own way of life, follow their feelings…'

Daniel: 'Perhaps I do, but I don't think they will turn out to be gay because they are my kids, and it is me who is teaching them what is right and what is wrong.'

Coach: 'Would it be wrong for you to love a kid who is gay? You would reject your own son?'

Daniel: [long silence] 'No, I don't know, I just can't imagine this… This won't be… never… [shaking his head], at least I hope, you know… that it won't be…'

This passage shows the systemic solution-oriented stance of the practitioner, i.e. not moralising, judging, instructing or knowing, but rather remaining curiously interested, and following Daniel's narrative lead. The systemic approach assumes that instructive change is not possible and is certainly not sustainable. Individuals only engage in a sustainable, long-term change process from their own conviction and intrinsic motivation.

This approach entails bringing the individual into a reflective mode, to consider what is important to them, specifically in terms of their attitude and conviction, and what the consequences will be for them as well as for their children. Why does the person, as a parent, want to maintain extremist attitudes and not change? And how does this correspond to their claim to the role of parent, as they would like to fulfil it? The coach challenges the homogenisations in the attitude, explores ambivalences and tries to find or establish exceptions.

The dialogue excerpt shows how small steps are taken to address the individual's attitudes and how impulses for reflection are presented without bringing devaluation and moral judgement into play, since this can reinforce extremist attitudes [28]. This approach does not, however, exclude the possibility of the practitioners clearly positioning themselves and their values at this or any other point of the coaching process. The procedure shows how questions and reflections of ambivalence can provoke irritability. This in turn can trigger an internal contemplation and searching process within the person. Experience has shown that even if the individual seems to cling to the original attitude at first, change processes take time and may only become apparent later.

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[28] See Sold & Abay Gaspar, Counter-narratives – curse or blessing?

Key learnings

- The approach as applied to the coaching of parents in prison with a focus on their children to prevent radicalisation has proven successful and can be transferred to prisons in other European countries.

- Similar approaches may also be successful in reaching parents with an extremist religious–political orientation and strengthening their distancing processes through their interest in the children's development.

- By involving relatives (including partners, grandparents, siblings) and municipal institutions (e.g. youth welfare offices), the success of the process can be significantly enhanced.

- The individual coaching sessions are typically preferred by imprisoned parents, as they can discuss sensitive issues in a 'safer' way. Group sessions can also work if the concerns of the participants are carefully coordinated in advance, and as long as group and individual sessions are combined.

- A reflection on values – i.e. the taking up of topics such as intersectionality, gender, racism, human rights – should always be understood as a cross-cutting issue, and should always be used to good advantage when it crops up in the conversation.

- Solid financing is required for the implementation of regular parent coaching in detention. This can be ensured through state or federal funding from the judiciary, for example.

Lessons for future approaches

Based on the relevant experience, the following lessons for practitioners have been identified. These might be especially helpful and adaptable for professionals working with Islamist extremist parents returning from combat zones.

Violent-extremist comradeships, gangs or other political or religious extremist groups are attractive because they promise their members a sense of belonging and recognition, and thus convey purpose, appreciation and orientation – elements commonly lacking from their homes and parental situations, where they often had to submit to authoritarian educational methods [29]. Coaching therefore also reflects on educational styles and their underlying values, and it works specifically on how parents teach their children about reliability, so they can develop a resilient and self-confident personality, less prone to seeking recognition in a radicalised milieu. This also means accompanying the participants in addressing their own past injuries, violent experiences, and traumas. This is a condition for effectively interrupting the negative effects of transgenerational transmission of attitude patterns on children. During the coaching, imprisoned parents can be sensitised to the needs of their children — and to how they can remain reliable caregivers, whether they can care for them personally or not.

In principle, the content of the coaching sessions should be oriented to the goals formulated by the participants themselves. Practitioners initiate the participants' reflections on their values, convictions, norms and beliefs, their effects on their own life planning, their parental role and their effects on the children. If possible, people from the participants' environment (i.e. children, partners, foster parents and youth welfare officers) should be involved in the process.

Access to the target group of imprisoned parents (direct target group)

In prisons where projects addressing the topic of parenthood in combination with reflection on ideological beliefs were offered, the demand from prisoners was high. To date, almost no programmes exist in Europe

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[29] See Altemeyer, *The Authoritarian Specter* and Röpke, *Die geführte Jugend.*

with this particular, specific focus. This is despite the potentially significant numbers of returning FTFs and their families and a growing attention to RWE in many European countries, both of which may lead to an increased number of incarcerated parents from different extremist spectrums.

Despite the need and demand for this type of work, and after a lengthy period of developing the approach and gaining the confidence of prison administrations and prisoner populations, certain barriers and challenges remained. These should be anticipated by practitioners when first establishing a similar approach. Both the educational prison staff and the potential participants reacted sceptically in the beginning. This was likely due to several factors.

a. Regarding the specific target group of right-wing extremist prisoners, staff were often unaware or in denial ('we don't have any right-wing extremists'). This is an indication that public institutions are reluctant to admit that they are not equipped to deal with extremist attitudes and statements in a technically and professionally appropriate manner.

b. The label 'extremist' provoked fear amongst potential participants that their attitudes would be 'changed' by force with such coaching.

c. The one-sided targeting roused irritation and anger amongst parents who felt unfairly overlooked or disregarded ('why do only the Nazis/jihadists get such a course?').

We consequently decided to 'open up' the programme for parents, regardless of their political or religious ideologies and world views. However, the reflection on values and norms is anchored as an important component. This strategy has proven its worth in recent years and can be formulated as a condition of success, something which should be taken into account when trying to reach imprisoned parents with extremist beliefs from all backgrounds. Parents with racist, sexist and xenophobic devaluation constructions, or even extremist, radically violent attitudes combined with ideological narratives, can be motivated to participate in parent coaching. Prison professionals may also notice a higher motivation to participate and engage in the measures once the programme is opened up to all parents. This confirms research findings on (de)radicalisation, namely that protective factors ([30]) such as children and the social environment have a greater impact on the processes of deradicalisation and distancing, if stigmatisation is avoided and the direct target group is addressed as 'parents' rather than 'extremists'.

Potential participants can be attracted through leaflets and posters displayed in the prison wards. The communication of the offer by psychological and socio-pedagogical services and group leaders, as well as the establishment of participation in the prison plan, may also be important for target group acquisition. This is in addition to the word-of-mouth communication amongst prisoners that also plays an important role in places where the coaching is already established.

Conditions for a successful parenting programme in the prison system

To implement parent coaching in detention and in the P/CVE context, the following conditions for success have been identified.

● Parental awareness of the impact of punitive measures on children and childcare needs to be raised at the beginning of their imprisonment; similarly, awareness should be raised among judiciary and prison authorities. To date, many authorities and stakeholders lack awareness of how many children are affected by their decisions, and thus do not put enough weight on childcare matters and the potential compatibility of punitive measures with childcare. A first step in the right direction is to record the number of incarcerated parents and report the statistics to the respective ministries, to allow for appropriate measures to be developed. Relatives, children and parents should be made aware of counselling and support services in good time, both before and shortly after imprisonment. This can be done by state authorities such as the police, the public prosecutor's office, juvenile court assistance, and specialist services for pretrial detention such as the admission and diagnostic departments of prisons.

([30]) Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Approaches to countering radicalisation and dealing with violent extremist and terrorist offenders in prisons and probation.*

- Prisons should provide counselling and coaching services through internal and external providers, to enable imprisoned parents to better cope with the challenges that imprisonment poses to their parenthood, and to maintain or stabilise the bond with their children.

- Opening up the target groups to include non-extremist parents is an important condition for success in reaching parents who have already become radicalised or who pursue extremist and violent ideologies: the point is to avoid singling this group out from the larger prison population. So parenting programmes in detention should be aimed generally at 'parents' overall, not limited to extremist/radicalised parents.

- Parent coaching with a radicalisation-prevention approach to children should be discussed in and accompany regular 'dialogue rounds' with prison and departmental management, the educational and psychological specialist services, and the general prison service. This is where the approach of imprisoned fathers and mothers or the 'strategies for the willingness of imprisoned parents to cooperate' can be coordinated.

- It is indispensable to identify key personnel in the prison who can act as contact persons for the measures' implementation. These 'parent representatives' not only assist those responsible for the project but also organise and coordinate other family-oriented processes in prison (e.g. they may also be available as contact persons for parents outside prison whose children and adolescents are imprisoned). They should be granted sufficient time for this role and the corresponding actions; otherwise, it is recommended that a corresponding personnel position be provided in the prison.

- The involvement of relatives (e.g. foster parents, grandparent and siblings) as well as municipal institutions (e.g. youth welfare offices and family counselling centres) can significantly enhance and improve the results of parenting programmes.

- Other vital measures include the design of child-friendly visiting rooms, the potential for parent–child encounters outside prison, and easier access to telephone contact with the children. This will make it possible to create more everyday situations that strengthen the bond between parents and children. These measures support family contact, which is considered an significant resource for successful resocialisation.

- Measures should be designed to sensitise prison staff, regional social services professionals, educators, social workers, teachers, psychologists and therapists. They should be informed of the specific circumstances and vulnerability of the children of imprisoned parents so as to identify the children's needs, and provide professional support services that help the children understand and process the situation.

- An important condition for success is the systemic attitude of the coaches and counsellors, which should be characterised by positions such as 'not knowing', being 'open to results', and 'respecting the individual's autonomy'. Additional qualifications in family therapy complement the systemic competencies of the coaches.

- Since the coaches are active in both prevention of radicalisation in relation to children and secondary prevention with imprisoned parents, and since cross-cutting issues of racism, discrimination and gender will emerge and should therefore be addressed in every session, it is essential that the coaches continuously reflect on their attitudes and positions in supervision and intervision, question their pedagogical approaches and keep a watchful eye on their self-care.

- Another essential condition for the success of parent coaching in prison is of course the financial framework ([31]).

([31]) After the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth funded Präfix R and Präfix R plus for 5 years as a model project, the State of Berlin included the parent coaching sessions in its regular funding and thus implemented the coaching.

Challenges for parent coaching in detention

- Prison, with its normative claim to resocialisation – e.g. through family orientation – is still considered by experts as a *kontrafaktische norm* (counterfactual norm), due to the lived experience of imprisoned men and women in a closed institution ([32]).

- Addressing the target group, especially if they react with suspicion, mistrust or rejection, calls for tact and sensitivity from the specialist services on site, who must motivate the parents to participate in parent coaching and appreciate the associated potential for the positive development of their children. This requires specialised services that support project goals.

- The voluntary nature of the services is often an important prerequisite for long-term sustainable change processes. Instructions and orders to participate can make it difficult to establish a beneficial relationship between coach and parent. At the same time, inclusion of the measure in the enforcement plan can serve as a bridge for participants to deal with the topics at hand. The experience of being able to shape the process and not be changed as a person in an instructive way (which is in any case not possible, according to the systemic fundamental attitude ([33])), can in turn contribute to the generation of intrinsic motivation.

- Group settings can trigger reservations and fears in imprisoned parents that intimate information will be disclosed to other participants. For this reason, they often decide in favour of individual coaching in preliminary discussions. When group sessions are held, the challenge is to ensure that in addition, sufficient individual sessions are available for the more sensitive needs of participants.

- The dialogue rounds mentioned earlier, which serve as a means of case-oriented coordination between coaches and specialist services, cannot always be implemented regularly under conditions of staff shortage and overload. Digital workplaces in prisons would better meet these challenges.

- The need for support services for children and relatives can be complex and challenging. Interdisciplinary cooperation is essential in this context. The higher demand of these 'complex cases' often exceeds the hourly quotas of the coaches.

- The transition after release from prison back into the family is a vulnerable phase. This is where further approaches and support for transition management are needed: this should focus on the development of the children in addition to issues such as housing and work.

- The connection between the prevention of radicalisation and deradicalisation/distance work in the context of parent coaching in prison not only calls for family therapy know-how, but also requires expert knowledge in the areas of sexism, gender, intersectionality, racism, antisemitism, etc. This combined, complementary knowledge requires further and ongoing training and qualifications.

- Due to the current Covid-19 pandemic measures, the broad adoption of digital communication tools between coaches and imprisoned parents, specialised services and relatives, as well as between imprisoned parents and their children and relatives, is an urgent and timely measure that must be implemented.

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[32] Ramsbrock, *Geschlossene Gesellschaft.*
[33] Levold & Wirsching, *Systemische Therapie und Beratung.*

Further reading

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