

The impact on a child when witnessing an arrest

The arrest of a family member is usually a traumatic event for everyone. It can be particularly traumatic for children, especially if they witness the event, and even more so if it involves violence, handcuffing or the producing of weapons.

If it is your partner who has been arrested you will be feeling a lot of emotions around this event. For your child the witnessing of the arrest of a family member, particularly a parent is a traumatic event. This has been well documented.

Even though you are feeling bad yourself, you need to consider how best to support your child through and after this event to reduce the trauma. The child will take his cue from you. Reducing trauma helps to reduce its negative flow on effects.

Thinking of the right support for your child could lessen the risk of more difficulties for you and the child in the future. It's hard to think outside your own immediate needs at times like this. Think of it as an investment in your child's future, in the future of your family's relationships. You will feel better about these events further down the track if you feel that you have taken back some control and supported your children as best you can.

You can expect a child to respond in varying degrees to any trauma. Witnessing the arrest of a parent is a trauma. The circumstances of that arrest, the degree of distress displayed etc, will determine how traumatic it is for the child. Here are some of the impacts which child psychologists identify in children who have experienced trauma such as an arrest:

- **Emotional changes:** anger, fear, confusion, helplessness, shame, guilt, rejection
- **Behaviours:** aggression, destructiveness, defiance, reversion to childish behaviours, disrupted sleep
- **Learning:** drop off in school performance or attendance, resistance to or suspicion of authority figures.
- **Socialising:** withdrawal and isolation, bullying.

If your child exhibits some of these behaviours, read it as a cry for help to you the adult. It can all be a bit overwhelming. That is why there are support networks. You are the child's first and most important support. You should also seek help for yourself.

What can I do to support my child?

As adults we perceive and respond to events differently from how we did as children. It is easy to forget or overlook how frightening events can seem to a child. Children are not able to explain or understand events with the clearness of adults. Very young children can become distressed by separation from a parent, loud noises, sudden events, strangers, aggressive speech, sudden change in circumstances or seeing adults in distress. No child of any age would find these events easy to deal with. If the adult is distressed or frightened by an event, think how much more distressing it is for the child. Children will respond differently at different stages of development.

Think first of the child: take the time to look out for and talk to him. Provide a supportive environment after the arrest do this by gathering a small trusted support team around you. Try to keep the child's life stable as possible. Try to avoid too much change too quickly. Give the child time to adjust to each change. Separations from a parent, a shift of house, a change of school are all major events even for adults to cope with. Talk as calmly and truthfully as you can with the child about what is happening without overloading them with details. Confusion and mystery increase fear in children. Recognise the



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child's loyalty to the arrested parent. Reassure the child about the parent's safety. Give simple, calm explanations. Don't overload the child.

Be careful how you speak about the arrested parent in front of the child. Negative messages set up tensions and guilt in the child. The child has a right to love his parent. Reassure the child that the parent being removed still loves the child and will remain involved in the child's life. If practicable explain that you will be visiting the parent. Does the child have a comfort toy? Don't rush or overwhelm the child. Read his body language, listen to him. Trauma may hamper your child's capacity to listen, to reason and to retain information. You may need to take time to talk further about the event when the child is less distressed.

A big ask, isn't it!

You did not ask to be in this situation and now you find yourself as the main family support person. It all comes down to you. You have had your own trauma and are being asked to put your child needs before your own considerable distress. In years to come, you will be glad you did, and respect yourself for the effort made when the chips were down. Meanwhile, give your child and yourself the best chance to "bounce back": Surround yourself with people you can trust and share with Use family counselling services and community support agencies in your district. A good family G.P. is invaluable. If you do not have one, ask around.

Something to think about:

Most school have very good welfare programs (much different to our own school experiences.) A trusted teacher or school counsellor can be a wonderful ally for you and your child. Too many parents are reluctant to approach schools, especially high schools. Open communication will help you and your child. There are caring teachers on the staff in every school. It might not always be your child's class teacher. Ask around. A trusted teacher can make a huge difference in a child's life.

