

**“Everybody in prison was once a child”: for the first time,
young adults with experience of parental imprisonment
curate Koestler Arts exhibition at Southbank Centre**



The Childhood of My Dreams, Orwell House, Painting, 2026

**Koestler Arts runs the UK’s largest awards and exhibitions programme
recognising creative work by people in secure settings**

**The Parental Imprisonment Collective brings together more than 200
artworks selected from over 7,500 entries into the exhibition:**

Rock, Paper, Scissors

Koestler Arts Annual Exhibition 2026

16 October – 29 November

Undercroft, Southbank Centre

Free entry

This autumn, Koestler Arts returns to the Southbank Centre with its annual exhibition celebrating the creativity, talent and imagination of people in criminal justice settings. *Rock, Paper, Scissors* opens on 16 October in the Undercroft and presents artworks submitted to the 2026 Koestler Awards, the UK’s only national arts awards programme for work made in prisons, secure hospitals, young offender institutions and by people on probation.



For the first time in the show's history, the artworks have been selected by members of the Parental Imprisonment Collective (PIC), a group of young adults with experience of a parent in prison during childhood. PIC are supported by Young Ambassadors from Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT), a leading charity working with children and families affected by parental imprisonment. Bringing together five different perspectives, the curators have created an exhibition that invites audiences to look beyond assumptions about imprisonment and consider the complex human stories behind the artworks.

The 2026 exhibition follows a distinguished line of Koestler Arts guest curators. Previous curators for the exhibition have included Ai Weiwei, Antony Gormley, Benjamin Zephaniah, Camille Walala, Grayson Perry, Inua Ellams, Jeremy Deller and John Costi, Lady Unchained, Sarah Lucas, and Speech DeBelle.

This year's curators hope visitors will reconsider what it means to have a parent in prison, while also recognising that people in criminal justice settings are not defined solely by their circumstances or their sentence. The exhibition highlights the complexity of individual experiences, revealing stories of creativity, imagination, humour, vulnerability and hope.

The Parental Imprisonment Collective said: "We've come together to curate an exhibition that charts a journey of life from childhood onwards, and the different paths a life can take. We hope we've interpreted the work in a way the artists themselves would recognise."

"When people go through the exhibition, we want them to think differently about what it means to grow up with a parent in prison. We also want visitors to remember that everybody in prison was once a child too. They are not just the sum of their sentence."

Estimates suggest around 193,000 children in England and Wales had a parent in prison in a given year. Based on average primary class sizes, this is roughly equivalent to one child in every two primary school classes. Many people are likely to know a child affected by imprisonment, even if they are unaware of it.

The exhibition takes its title - *Rock, Paper, Scissors* - from the familiar game of chance, choice and consequence. The title reflects themes that emerged during PIC's selection: the randomness and contingency of life, and the ways circumstance, timing, pressure and decision-making can intersect. It also evokes the wide range of materials and objects used by Koestler Awards entrants, from paper, textile and paint to sculpture, craft, found materials, music and writing.



Return of the Mack Back in the Can, HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Prescoed, Matchstick Model, 2026

In selecting artworks, PIC worked without any information about the artists or their circumstances, responding only to the work in front of them. Their selection moves through themes including childhood, family, home, confinement, imagination and landscape, highlighting the complexity of individual experience rather than offering a single story about imprisonment. The exhibition brings together creativity, humour, vulnerability and hope, and invites visitors to consider the different paths a life can take from childhood onwards.

The exhibition will feature work across painting, drawing, sculpture, textiles, music, writing, craft and design, showcasing the extraordinary range of creativity entered into the 2026 Koestler Awards. The Awards are judged each year by artists, creative experts, and professionals – this year's Awards were judged by the likes of musicians Hot Chip, artists Bob and Roberta Smith and Phoebe Boswell, Tate curator Helen O'Malley, and Lee Child, author of the Jack Reacher novels and the UK's first ever Prison Reading Laureate.

Alongside the exhibition, Koestler Arts and the Southbank Centre will present a programme of events exploring creativity, connection and the role of the arts in criminal justice settings. Visitors will be invited to respond directly to works on display, with feedback messages shared with the artists.



A programme of events and activities around the exhibition will include *Words In, Words Out*, part of London Literature Festival and in association with Service95 Book Club, reflecting on the power of literature, reading, and writing in Britain's criminal justice system. Some artworks from the exhibition will be available to buy through the Koestler Arts website with donations to Victim Support.

Fiona Curran, Chief Executive of Koestler Arts, said: "We are delighted to present this remarkable exhibition, so thoughtfully curated by the Parental Imprisonment Collective in a new space at the Southbank Centre. The young adults worked together to select works that resonated with them from thousands of artworks created in secure settings across the UK — pieces that moved, surprised and inspired them. Together, these works offer a powerful insight into the experiences of those left behind when a parent or carer is in prison, while also exploring the universal themes of family, belonging, resilience and the unexpected paths that shape our lives."

Mark Ball, Artistic Director of Southbank Centre, said: "Supporting and celebrating young artists, producers, and curators - who in the years ahead will define our understanding of the world through their art and culture - is a central tenet of the Southbank Centre's 75th anniversary, and of our ambition to be the Arts Centre of the Future. As debates rage about the state of our prisons and the growing prison population, this year's Koestler Arts exhibition centres those who serve a different type of sentence through the curation of the Parental Imprisonment Collective, a group of young people with lived experience of parental imprisonment. Their show, exhibited in our newly refurbished Undercroft space, centres their voices and stories and offers an important discourse on imprisonment, arts and wellbeing."

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EXHIBITION INFORMATION

Rock, Paper, Scissors
Koestler Arts Annual Exhibition 2026
15 October – 29 November
Undercroft, Southbank Centre, Belvedere Road
London, SE1 8XX

Free admission

Opening hours:
Tuesday – Sunday, 12pm – 8pm
Closed Mondays

<https://koestlerarts.org.uk> | @koestlerarts



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[DOWNLOAD PRESS IMAGES HERE](#)

Notes to Editors

About Koestler Arts

Koestler Arts is a leading arts charity working across the criminal justice system. Its vision is that the power of the arts unlocks hope, talent and potential in the lives of people in criminal justice settings.

Koestler Arts runs the annual Koestler Awards, the UK's only national arts awards programme for people in prisons, secure mental health hospitals, immigration removal centres, young offender institutions and people serving sentences in the community.

Alongside the awards, Koestler Arts provides arts mentoring, creative opportunities, family engagement projects, exhibitions, events and publications, working in partnership with artists, cultural organisations and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

Previous Koestler Arts guest curators include Ai Weiwei, Antony Gormley, Benjamin Zephaniah, Camille Walala, Grayson Perry, Inua Ellams, Jeremy Deller and John Costi, Lady Unchained, Sarah Lucas, and Speech DeBelle.

About the Parental Imprisonment Collective (PIC)

The Parental Imprisonment Collective (PIC) is a group of young adults aged 18–35 from across the UK with shared experience of parental imprisonment.

Powered by the Firebird Foundation, PIC amplifies the voices of people affected by parental imprisonment to influence policy, practice and public understanding across the UK and Europe.

Through advocacy, research and collaboration, PIC works to challenge stigma, improve understanding and ensure that the experiences of children and young adults affected by parental imprisonment are recognised and heard.



About Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest multi-arts centre and engages the most diverse audiences of any performing arts organisation in the UK. Our biggest venue, the Royal Festival Hall (2,700 seats) is the lasting legacy of the 1951 Festival of Britain and the ambition and values of that project – that arts, ideas, innovation and culture can heal communities and should be available and accessible to everyone – are still our guiding principles today. The Southbank Centre is uniquely able to offer a wide-ranging, inclusive and world-class artistic programme spanning contemporary visual arts, music, dance, performance, literature, comedy and spoken word across the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and our free spaces. We are also home to the National Poetry Library, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), two resident organisations (Kinetika Bloco and Tomorrow's Warriors) and six resident orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra). www.southbankcentre.co.uk

Children with a parent in prison estimate

The estimate of around 193,000 children is based on the Ministry of Justice publication *Official Statistics in Development: Estimates of children with a parent in prison*. The report gives a best estimate of 192,912 children in England and Wales with a parent in prison between 1 October 2021 and 1 October 2022. The statistics are described as “official statistics in development”, meaning they are new statistics produced using developing sources and methods and should be interpreted with some caution. [Children with a parent in prison - Official Stats in Development 2024.pdf](#)

The “one child in every two primary school classes” comparison is an illustrative calculation based on average primary class size. The Department for Education's 2023/24 school workforce census reports an average primary school class size in England of about 26.6 pupils. Two average primary classes would therefore contain approximately 53 pupils. An estimate of 193,000 children with a parent in prison is equivalent to about 1.7% of the 0–17 population of England and Wales, or roughly one child in 58. This is close to one child across two average primary school classes, and is intended as an accessible illustration rather than a separate official statistic.