Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Incarcerated Parents

Introduction

Extensive research shows the importance of the parent-child relationship and the deep and often traumatic effect that the loss of a parent can have for a child. For children who experience the incarceration of a parent, the traumatic effects may be comparable to loss of a parent through death or divorce, and this trauma may be compounded by subsequent involvement with the child welfare system.[1]

This brief is for the caseworkers and caregivers who support these children. The focus is on maintaining the parent-child bond in the face of a parent's absence due to incarceration. This crucial task is often complicated by the challenges posed by the criminal justice system and the stress that criminal justice involvement can cause for families.

Guiding Thought: The known is always easier than the imagined. When possible, be truthful with children about their parents' whereabouts. This may mean different explanations at each stage of development, but truthfulness minimizes anxiety at any age.

Parents incarcerated in state and federal prisons are more likely to be serving time for drug and public-order offenses than violent offenses.[2] For incarcerated parents, relatively short sentences (5 or fewer years) are common,[3] and most incarcerated parents are likely to be part of their child's life after they are released. Maintaining contact is a crucial part of preparing for release. Visiting the incarcerated parent is also part of most reunification plans for children in the child welfare system. For the incarcerated parent, in-prison parenting programs and other interventions that include family visits are shown to correlate with lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem, and more parental involvement with their children following release.[4]

The Intersection of Incarceration and Child Welfare

Often, the reasons for the parent's incarceration and reasons for child welfare involvement are not connected to each other. The majority of children of incarcerated parents are not involved with child welfare systems,[5] and, of those children who are, very few entered the child welfare system as a result of abuse or neglect before the parent's incarceration.[6] Some enter child welfare as a direct result of the need for placement at the time of a primary caregiving parent's arrest—with no prior abuse or neglect.[7]

1 Turney, K. & Goodsell, R. (2018). Parental incarceration and children's wellbeing. *Future of Children, 28*(1), 147–164. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1179185.pdf.
2 Glaze, L.E. & Maruschak, L.M. (2010). *Parents in prison and their minor children.* U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved from https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf.
3 Glaze & Maruscak, 2010.
4 LaVigne, N. G., Naser, R. L., Brooks, L. E., & Castro, J. L. (2005). Examining the effect of incarceration and on prison family contact on prisoners' family relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 21*, 314–355. doi:10.1177/10439862052817
5 Glaze & Maruscak, 2010.
6 Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Cuesta, L., & Noyes, J. (2016). Families at the intersection of the criminal justice and child protective services systems. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 665*(1), 171–194. doi:10.1177/0002716216633058
7 Berger, L.M., et.al. 2016.

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While underreporting and other issues make getting reliable information difficult, AFCARS data shows that parental incarceration is listed as a factor in about 8% of all child welfare cases.[8] Other children with incarcerated parents enter the child welfare system because of secondary or indirect effects of parental incarceration, including the following:

- Reduction of stability—economic and social support
- Parenting/child care stress for the caregiver

A national study showed that one in every three children who was the subject of a child welfare report had a parent who had been arrested at least once. A national study showed that one in every three children who was the subject of a child welfare report had a parent who had been arrested at least once. However, studies show that higher levels of surveillance, monitoring, policing, and reporting of low-income families of color could result in overrepresentation of these families in both systems.[9]

The Importance of Supporting Parent-Child Contact

Many things influence a child's ability to cope with parental incarceration, such as family dynamics, available supports, degree of trauma for the child and caregivers, and details of the crime and/or incarceration. Several studies have shown that maintaining contact between incarcerated parents and their children—with visits conducted in supportive, safe, and child-friendly environments—is likely to be the best option to mitigate the harmful effects of parental incarceration on families.[10] The collective observations of clinicians and community service providers also suggest that most children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit their parents. For many children, communicating with the parent can minimize or repair attachment disruptions, provide opportunities to talk about their feelings, and help them cope with the grief and loss resulting from the separation. Seeing the correctional facility and the parent during a visit also can correct frightening images and idealized fantasies.

This brief focuses on key issues related to communication and visiting at different stages of child development.

A second brief, entitled "Supporting Connections for Children with Incarcerated Parents," provides concrete tips for supporting effective visits and communication between an incarcerated parent and their child.

8 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2017). *The AFCARS report, 24*. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf.

9 Berger, L.M. et.al., 2016.

10 Lindsey Cramer, Margaret Goff, Bryce Peterson, and Heather Sandstrom. (2017). *Parent-child visiting practices in prisons and jails: A synthesis of research and practice*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Developmental Guide for Supporting Connections

This developmental guide is adapted from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library by Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director, National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated. For a list of additional resources, see "Learn More" on page 9.

INFANCY: 0–12 MONTHS

Developmental considerations: During this stage, infants begin learning that adults are there to meet their needs and begin attaching or connecting to their caregivers. The sight, sound, and smell of caregivers are important touchstones that are crucial in the development of attachment and trust. If a parent is incarcerated, the infant is likely to sense his or her absence even if that parent was not consistently available to the child. If a primary caregiver parent "disappears" to go to prison, it could be traumatic for the child and interfere not only with the development of trust, but also with healthy brain development.

Visiting: Frequent visits during infancy are crucial for establishing the parent-child bond. Ideally, visiting conditions allow the parent to touch, hold, play with, and even feed the child. Check with the facility first to see what is allowed, and come prepared. If feeding is allowed, bring formula or baby food.

Maintaining the connection

- Let infants hear a recording of their parent's voice.
- Wash infants' sheets and clothes in soap or body wash the parent uses.
- Communicate regularly with the incarcerated parent. At this age, children change rapidly, so sending parents pictures and descriptions of baby's milestones can be an important way to help them stay connected.

Before visits, caregivers can:

- Allow the infant lots of time unencumbered by seats and straps. If they will need to be restrained during the visit, let them be out of the car seat, walker, or stroller and roll around on the floor, grass, or blanket for a while before the visit.
- Make sure that the infant has been changed and fed so they won't be uncomfortable in the visit.

During visits, caregivers can:

- Hold the infant so they can see the parent clearly if physical contact is not allowed.
- Help the parent to understand baby's cues and signals they may not be familiar with.
- Encourage the parent to hold the infant, if physical contact is allowed. Even if the child cries at first, allow time for them to get comfortable and be soothed by the parent.

TODDLER: 1–2 YEARS

Developmental considerations: During this stage, toddlers are learning how their caregivers attend to their new needs. Toddlers want to be independent, not controlled—but they also want to feel safe. Toddlers' new mobility can make visits harder because they may not want to sit still or obey rules. This stage is challenging for caregivers, especially those dealing with the restrictions of correctional facilities.

Visiting: Again, frequent visits are important for young children as a way of building or maintaining the parent-child bond. Be cautious though; visits can easily go "wrong" when a young child can't comply with the rules and restrictions of a prison environment. Be prepared to cut visits short and prepare both the incarcerated parent and the child for the frustration or disappointment that this can cause.

Maintaining the connection

- Show toddlers many pictures and/or videos of the incarcerated parent.
- Communicate with the incarcerated parent, emphasizing the new ways the child is communicating, and recent milestones or achievements. Recognize and understand that these moments that the parent is missing can cause great sadness and distress to incarcerated parents.
- Let the parent know about the child's favorite toy, friends, or activities.

Before visits, caregivers can:

- Ensure toddlers are well-rested and fed to minimize crankiness.
- Give clear rules/limits with consequences, but try to tell toddler what they can do, not what they shouldn't do. "Walk, Junior. If you run, you will have to sit on Mom-Mom's lap" is better than "Stop running."
- Think of creative ways to keep the child's attention during long waits. Pack toys and activities for the child to do. Remember that you may not be able to take anything into the visit.

During visits, caregivers can:

- Point out the child's new skills or recent developmental achievements.
- Stay close, but encourage the child to sit with or be with the parent (if allowed).

PRESCHOOLER: 3–5 YEARS

Developmental considerations: This stage is one of opposition, power, control, and imagination. It is important for preschool children to know that they have some influence over adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development; without this relationship, children can feel guilty, powerless, and out of control. These feelings could have lasting consequences. Children are just starting to engage in written communication through pictures and words at this phase; this is a great opportunity to build ongoing communication between parent and child.

Maintaining the connection

- Read children letters from parents and send their drawings to parents.
- Communicate with the incarcerated parent, emphasizing the new ways the child is communicating, and recent milestones or achievements.
- Let the parent know about the child's favorite toy, friends, or activities.
- Use the child's developing communication skills to promote regular contact. For example, have the child draw or write a daily update to their parent.
- Make audio recordings. Many facilities have programs such as "Books on Tape" or "Storybook Moms," which allow a parent to record themselves reading from a child's favorite books. There may also be opportunities to record messages to send to children.
- Set up conference calls. Some correctional facilities collaborate with schools, Head Start Programs, and other child-focused agencies to allow parents to call in to parent-teacher conferences or case planning meetings. This increases the parent's sense of parental identity and provides connection with the child's daily life.

Before visits, caregivers can:

- Ensure the child is well-rested and fed to minimize crankiness.
- Talk with the child about the facility, its rules, and why they need to respect the rules.
- Talk with the child about what they want to share with the parent.
- Ask the child about the questions they have and share with the parent so they can prepare how they want to answer.

After visits, caregivers can:

- Check in with the child and help them process how they are feeling. Acknowledge feelings like sadness and anger—while reminding the child that the parent loves them.

SCHOOL AGE AND PREADOLESCENCE: 6–12 YEARS

Developmental considerations: As children enter school, they begin to orient toward peers and external environments—parents and home aren't the center of their universe anymore. They start developing emotions like embarrassment and shame, and they understand the concept of "crime and punishment." Around these ages, children become aware of the stigma around parental incarceration, which makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates. Children around these ages may distance themselves from the incarcerated parent to exercise choice and avoid embarrassment.

Visiting: On one hand, visits at these ages can be more fulfilling for everyone because children need less physical stimulation, can sit still longer, and can engage in deeper conversations. On the other hand, children may be more resistant to visits as they deal with their own emotional responses to seeing their parent, experience internal conflicts about their loyalty to parents versus caregivers, and worry about external perceptions.

Maintaining the connection

- Encourage children to establish regular, independent communication with their parent. This can come in the form of letters, phone calls, or visits.
- Encourage children to take pictures of projects completed at school and to save report cards, awards, and diplomas so they can be shared with the parent.
- Send school papers to parents. Most children and their parents have an easier time with school work that received a good grade; but encourage children to send their less than perfect work as well. Some incarcerated parents feel more connected to their children that they need help, especially when parents can write back with ideas and questions.
- Engage the parent in decision making about things going on in the child's life. This helps to reinforce the idea that the parent cares and has a parenting role—even if they can't be there.

Before visits, caregivers can:

- Try to talk through any resistance the child has to the visit. While it is important not to force children to visit, talk about why it is important to stay connected to their parent.
- Help the child prepare—sometimes it is hard for children to imagine what to talk about. Help them keep a list of things to share.
- Talk through the prison environment and rules with them so they will be prepared for the experience.
- When children have deeper questions for their parent about their crime, their life before incarceration, or their life in prison, encourage them to share those questions in writing ahead of time so the parent can prepare to discuss these issues with the child.

SCHOOL AGE AND PREADOLESCENCE: 6–12 YEARS *(CONTINUED)*

Maintaining the connection

- Talk with kids and help them get support if they are experiencing bullying or teasing because of their parent's incarceration. The negative impact from this can bleed into the child's relationship with their parent.
- Use technology. Some facilities have tablet programs with communication apps for families.

After visits, caregivers can:

- Check in with the child and help them process their emotion and reactions. Ask them about what they remembered or liked best about the visit and also what they didn't like or found hard to say. This will let them know that it is OK to talk about their parents. It will also prepare them for the next visit.
- Remember that children will ask questions that they have already asked and had answered in earlier stages of development. Each new stage comes with new ways of understanding information—so, the questions will be asked again.

ADOLESCENCE: 13–18 YEARS

Developmental considerations: Adolescents are figuring out who they are, where they are going, and who they want to go with. They are attempting to assess the dangers involved in the risk-taking impulses that come with this age. They are often expected to assume adult roles and they are well aware of reactions like "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" that many adults have to them and their circumstances. Teens with incarcerated parents can simultaneously fear they will turn out like their incarcerated parent; attempt to emulate them; and fiercely reject them. They also may have diminishing hope for reunification with the passing of time.

It is an emotional time for teens and caregivers. It is also difficult for the incarcerated parent to feel connected to what is happening in their child's life and not to feel hurt and defensive as teens struggle with the relationship. They may also identify with their teens and make assumptions about them based on their own adolescent struggles. Teens in today's world also sometimes have difficulty communicating without technology. They may become easily bored in visits and, in an effort to keep the peace, become silent.

Maintaining the connection

- Be flexible. As adolescents try to establish their own identity, they will often connect with their incarcerated parent as a way of finding themselves—and then suddenly reject having anything to do with them.
- Let adolescents begin to take the lead on reaching out and communicating with their parents directly.
- With the emotions of adolescence can come emotions and anger related to their parent's incarceration. Make sure that the adolescent has the space and trusted individuals to have these conversations with.
- Support adolescents who want to explore and learn more about the structural issues related to incarceration in this country. This may be helpful for putting their parent's experience in context. Look for advocacy and leadership programs for children with incarcerated parents; some research indicates that this kind of advocacy contributes to resilience.[1]

1 Johnson, D. & Sullivan, M. (2016). *Parental Incarceration: Personal Accounts and Developmental Impact.* New York: Routledge.

Before visits, caregivers can:

- Check in with the adolescent about how they are feeling about the visit, their hopes, and their anxieties.
- If adolescents want to visit alone, offer tangible and emotional support as they plan for the visit—whether that is transportation, accompanying them, or just listening.

After visits, caregivers can:

- Check in with the adolescent and help them process their emotions and reactions.
- Encourage adolescents to journal, draw, sing, or otherwise express their emotions and feelings.

Conclusion

At every age, it is important for children to be able to see and have contact with their parents. When parents are incarcerated, it can be challenging to overcome the many barriers to keeping children and their parents connected. The role of caregivers and caseworkers in helping to keep these connections in place is especially important in the face of parental incarceration. Without a supportive caregiver and the opportunity for regular contact, it will be hard for the parent-child relationship to stay strong. We recognize that it is challenging work and applaud those caregivers and caseworkers who go the extra mile to help incarcerated parents and their children stay connected.

Learn More

This document was produced in partnership with the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) and builds on content from the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library by Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director of NRCCFI. For more information, explore the following documents:

Visiting Mom or Dad

Communication Tips for the Incarcerated and Their Families

Different Children/Behaviors

Caring for Children of Incarcerated Parents

Questions from Caregivers

What Do Children of Incarcerated Parents and Their Caregivers Need?

Tips from Caregivers—for Caregivers

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