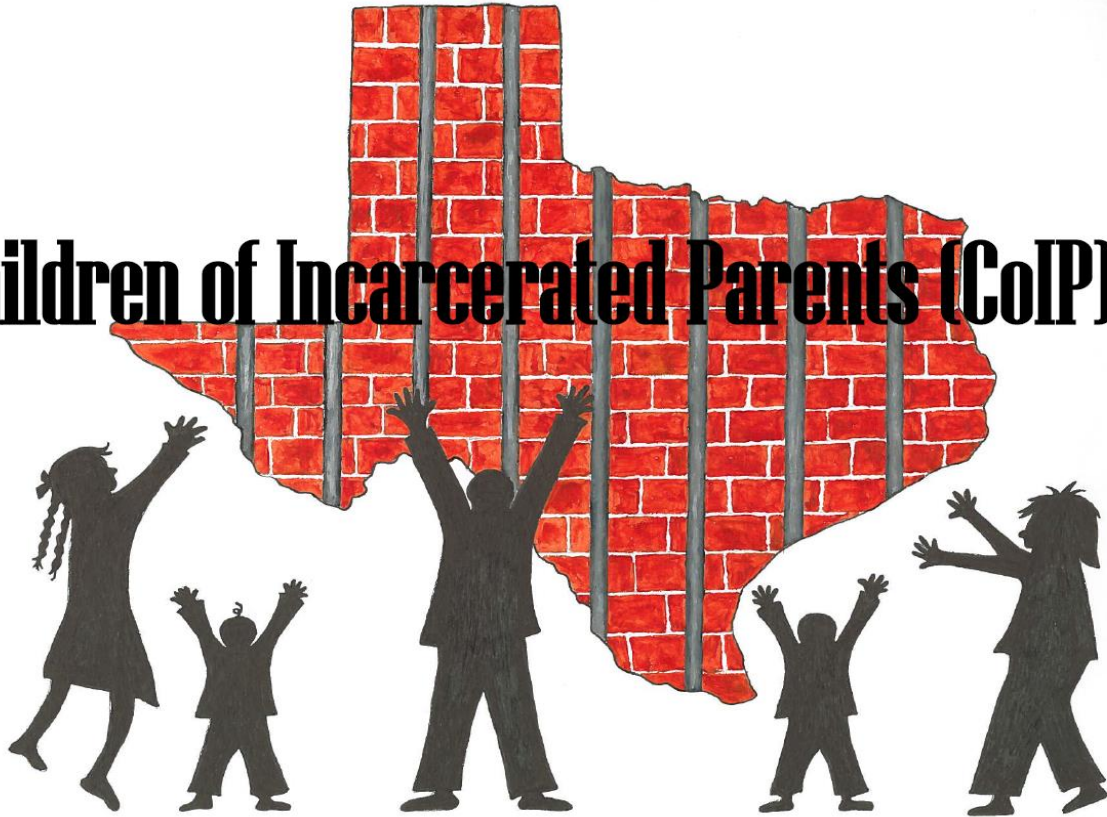


**Texas Children of Incarcerated Parents Project**

# **Children of Incarcerated Parents (CoIP)**



**Stronger Together, VOLUME I**

## **Understanding the Experiences of Children of Incarcerated Parents**



**Texas Inmate Families Association**

Strengthening families through support, education, and advocacy

## ABOUT THE TEXAS INMATE FAMILIES ASSOCIATION

TIFA is a 501(c) (3) non-profit. Our mission is to break the cycle of crime by strengthening families through support, education, and advocacy. TIFA also provides parole workshops as well as online resources for our members.

## ABOUT THE TEXAS CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS (COIP) PROJECT

As of November 2014, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) prison system had 187,000 individuals incarcerated---giving Texas the unenviable distinction of having more individuals behind bars than any other state in the country and the world. Then add the number of individuals incarcerated in federal prisons and county jails and the numbers began to create the picture of the significant impact incarceration policies have on the citizenry of Texas.

*Left behind are family members and friends:* As of August 2011, nearly 95,000 individuals incarcerated in Texas prisons self-reported as having children.<sup>1</sup> In 2007 more than 1.7 million American children had a parent in prison or jail.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 10 million children have a parent who is or has been under some form of criminal justice supervision.<sup>3</sup> In 2007, one in 43 (2.3%) American children had a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison.<sup>4</sup> One in 15 black children and 1 in 42 Latino children has a parent in prison, compared to 1 in 111 white children.<sup>5</sup> Approximately half of children with incarcerated parents are under ten years old.<sup>6</sup> 2% of incarcerated fathers and 8-10% of mothers have children in foster care<sup>7</sup> (these data do not include at least some persons in prison with children in foster care who are in kinship placements).

The intent of the Texas COIP Project is to bring Children out of the shadows so they occupy our thoughts when we make decisions, set policy, do research, and plan interventions

<sup>1</sup>. Data gleaned from a TDCJ information request, 2011; actual number: 94,635. Note additionally: 8,150 inmates in state jails self-reported children, while 2,160 individuals in SAFP facilities self-reported children. Data available upon request from the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition -

<http://www.texascjc.org/basic-facts-1>

<sup>2</sup>. Mauer, M., Nellis, A., Schirmer, S.; Incarcerated Parents and Their Children -Trends 1991- 2007, The Sentencing Project, Feb. 2009 - [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)

<sup>3</sup>. Hairston, C.F, Prisoners and Families: Parenting Issues During Incarceration. In J. Travis & M. Waul (eds.), Prisoners Once Removed. Washington, DC: The Urban Press Institute, 2003.

<https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=205858>

<sup>4</sup>. Mauer, M., Nellis, A., Schirmer, S.; Feb. 2009 Incarcerated Parents and Their Children -Trends 1991- 2007, [The Sentencing Project](http://www.sentencingproject.org).

<sup>5</sup>. Ibid [The Sentencing Project](http://www.sentencingproject.org).

<sup>6</sup>. Ibid

<sup>7</sup>. Mumola, C.J.-Incarcerated Parents and their Children (NCJ-182335). Wash, D.C. US Dept. of Justice, BOJS, 2000

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With express permission, this guide borrows extensive language from *Stronger Together* handbooks created by The Osborne Association's New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents. We are thankful for their expertise and hard work and for their permission to adapt the content of the *Stronger Together* handbooks to Texas. We are also thankful to Ann Adalist-Estrin for her expertise and permission to borrow language from the Children of Prisoners Library, Rutgers University.

These individuals and organizations are singled out for being part of the Caregiver Guide review committee. We offer a heartfelt thank you to the following who have been generous to lend their support to assist with this ambitious project:

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For further information about the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents or to download the three *Stronger Together* handbooks go to the website: [www.osborneny.org](http://www.osborneny.org) or email [info@osborneny.org](mailto:info@osborneny.org). The *Stronger Together* handbooks owe their existence to the wisdom, insight, vision, and deep commitment of their original authors who in 1993 issued *How Can I Help?*, a series of three handbooks published by The Osborne Association.

## CAVEATS ABOUT THE TEXAS COIP CAREGIVER GUIDE:

This guide focuses on the majority of situations in which parents are incarcerated for non-child related crimes. It does not address situations where a parent has harmed a child directly or indirectly, such as when a violent act was committed against the other parent, a sibling, or family member. These are complex cases and require careful and ongoing assessment, professional advice, and therapeutic support.

Next, while some of the information in the handbooks may apply to children whose parents are being held within immigration detention facilities or facing possible deportation, there are differences that must be noted: (1) families of deportees experience a heightened overlay of fear, about many things, which cancels out the differences that children of deportees may not feel their parent did anything wrong; and (2) what reunification means.

- For the child of a prisoner, the parent coming home "fixed" can be held as a hope.
- For the child of a deportee, the parent coming home necessarily means the parent breaking the law anew.

We are committed to empowering you to proactively reach out to children with incarcerated parents and their families to assist them in navigating this challenging and often painful experience.

**Stronger Together, Volume I - We recommend that you read *Understanding the Experiences of Children of Incarcerated Parents* in its entirety.** It will strengthen your understanding of children's feelings and responses, which will strengthen your ability to effectively respond to children's needs and in turn create supportive and understanding communities for children and families to live in---and for parents to return to. This guide is located on the **Texas Inmate Families Association** website at the following link: <http://tifa.org/>

**Stronger Together, Volume II: *Maintaining and Strengthening Family Ties for Children of Incarcerated Parents, from Arrest to Release.*** Discusses why and how to maintain parent-child relationships and provides Texas resources. This guide is located on the **Texas Inmate Families Association** website at the following link: <http://tifa.org/>

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## The National Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated\*

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent's arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be concerned when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well-cared for in my parent's absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see, and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent's incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed, or labeled because of my parent's incarceration.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.



\*The *Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents* was written in 2003 by Nell Bernstein, (journalist and author) and Gretchen Newby (a practitioner serving children of prisoners), based on interviews with children and families who have experienced parental incarceration. *San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership* (2005). See [www.sfcipp.org](http://www.sfcipp.org)

# Introduction

This Caregiver Guide is being provided to assist families who are parents and caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents in Texas. If you are a primary caregiver or foster parent who is caring for a child whose parent/primary caregiver has been arrested, facing trial, convicted of a crime, sentenced to incarceration, paroled, or released for reentry, this guide is for you.

You are among a unique group of caregivers who have family members or know parents who have been thrust into the criminal justice system for a few days, a year, a decade or maybe life. No matter what the specifics are, there is always an effect on a child when a parent/primary caregiver is incarcerated. The incarceration of this parental figure usually leads to higher levels of destabilization, emotional consequences of separation, and increased risk for negative outcomes.

You are in contact with children who are in crisis and you face the challenges of knowing how best to provide support to these children and answer their questions about their incarcerated loved ones. Teenagers may have an easier time understanding the criminal justice system and will have different questions than those from younger children.

This guide is also provided for social workers, teachers, clergy, juvenile probation officers, faith-based organizations, mentoring programs, or any other organization or individual that seeks to provide support to these children.

We hope this information will be useful as you work with this vulnerable population.

Sincerely,

*Theresa Moran,*

Theresa Moran, MSW

*COIP Project Lead, Child Advocate, member of TIFA, Travis County Reentry Task Force, and volunteer with the Storybook Project*

***The family is probably this country's most valuable resource for reducing crime.***

**A NOTE ABOUT CAREGIVERS** Throughout this volume we refer to caregivers, and it is important to clarify that for the sake of simplicity this will refer to all of the following people with whom children live and in whose custody they are: the child's other/custodial parent (which is the majority of cases when a father is incarcerated), and non-parent caregivers including relative caregivers, people who assume primary caregiving responsibilities. Children involved in the child welfare system who are cared for by foster parents and children involved with immigration issues are also included in this volume.

# Section

# 1

## What We Know

While there are common behaviors that many children exhibit, it is important to remember that each child copes and responds differently, with multiple factors contributing to his/her responses.

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Over the past four decades, there has been an explosive growth in the number of people arrested and incarcerated in jail and prison. The United States leads the world in incarceration, with an incarceration rate five to eight times that of other industrialized countries.<sup>1</sup> According to a Pew Center on the States report, in 2010 there were more than 2.3 million people in jails or prisons—most of whom were Black and Latino and incarcerated for nonviolent offenses—of which, more than 1.2 million were parents of children under age 18.<sup>2</sup> In 2013, there were 865,797 arrests in Texas, there were 650,639 men and 214,889 women arrested in Texas that year.<sup>3</sup>

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Nationally, there are more than 2.7 million children under age 18 with an incarcerated parent, and approximately 10 million children who have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.<sup>4</sup> This translates into 1 in every 28 children (3.6%) having an incarcerated parent, up from 1 in 125 children just 25 years ago.

In Texas, it is estimated that thousands of minor children have a parent serving time in prison or jail; this includes parents incarcerated in Texas' 112 state prisons, those

1 ABC News. "U.S. Prison Population Hits All-Time High: 2.3 Million". News Release, 6, June 2008.

2 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

3 Texas Department of Public Safety, The Texas Crime Report for 2013

[http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime\\_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm](http://www.txdps.state.tx.us/administration/crime_records/pages/crimestatistics.htm)

4 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010).



incarcerated in the county jails of Texas' 254 counties (66,807 incarcerated)<sup>5</sup> and in 16 federal prisons.<sup>6</sup> The majority of incarcerated men and women are parents.

These numbers actually under-count the number of children affected by a parent's arrest or incarceration. Many more children experience the incarceration of a close family member, yet these numbers remain unknown, because of the invisibility of this issue and the lack of responsibility of any single agency to keep statistics on this population of children (also, because, they do not include children over 18).

Children with an incarcerated parent may live in high-risk environments and experience a host of consequences, from the emotional and psychological trauma of separation, increased family disintegration and/or dysfunction, residential and financial instability, developmental challenges, social stigma and emotional pain, and a greater likelihood of exposure to extreme poverty.<sup>7</sup>

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Today, 1 in 9 African-American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%) and 1 in 57 Caucasian children (1.8%) have an incarcerated parent.<sup>8</sup>

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Most commonly, risk factors among children of incarcerated parents in the child welfare system operate along two pathways:

- 1) Parental problems that existed prior to and may have contributed to the parent's incarceration (e.g., addiction, mental illness, domestic violence), and
- 2) Problems introduced as a result of the incarceration (e.g., family and school disruption, trauma, grief, stigma).<sup>9</sup>

Parental incarceration is recognized as an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE), a measure of childhood trauma developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>10</sup> Exposure to multiple ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of long-term negative mental health and health outcomes. According to the children of incarcerated parents child welfare study by

5 Texas Commission on Jail Standards, 2013 Annual Report, January 31, 2014.  
<http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us/docs/2013AnnualJailReport.pdf>

6 The Osborne Association, (2010). *New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet*. Brooklyn, NY.

7 Phillips, S.D., Erkanlia, A., Keeler, G.P., Costellow, E.J., & Angold, A. (2006). Disentangling the risks: Parent criminal justice involvement and children's exposure to family risks. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5, pp. 667-702.

8 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010).

9 Phillips, S.D., et al. (2006).

10 For more information on ACE, read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/about.htm>.

Raimon, Lee, and Genty (2009) parental incarceration differs from other adverse childhood experiences because of the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma.<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember that there is no single story that best describes what it is like for a child to have a parent who is incarcerated. Experiences are diverse and so are their risk and protective factors, and thus, their outcomes as well.

The level of disruption caused by incarceration is likely related to whether the incarcerated parent was the child's primary caregiver prior to arrest. While fathers are incarcerated at much higher rates than mothers and make up the majority of incarcerated parents, more frequently mothers have been the primary caregiver. However, many fathers report living with their children before their arrest and playing a significant role in their children's lives.

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The incarceration of a primary caregiver usually leads to higher levels of destabilization, emotional consequences of separation, and increased risk for negative outcomes.

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No matter what the specifics are, there is always an effect on a child when a parent is incarcerated. The effect may not always be visible or obvious, but even children who "do well" bear the heavy burden of stigma. The next section discusses common feelings experienced by the *millions* of children whose parent is or was incarcerated.

11 Raimon, M., Lee, A., & Genty, P. (2009). *Sometimes Good Intentions Yield Bad Results: ASFA's Effect on Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. In *Intentions and Results: A look back at the Adoption and Safe Families Act 121*. [Urban Institute Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009].

# Section

## 2

### Common Feelings and Emotions

While every child responds differently and uniquely, parent child separation is one of the most serious and potentially traumatic experiences a child can have. **For many children, the experience of a sudden separation from a parent/primary caregiver due to arrest can be emotionally devastating, while for others it may be less destabilizing.** Children may have different feelings and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some common feelings children experience include: fear, anxiety and worry, sadness and isolation, anger, guilt, stigma and shame, confusion about roles, and resentment about deception. Each of these are discussed in the following pages.

#### FEAR, ANXIETY AND WORRY

The sudden disappearance of a parent is a terrifying experience. “Separation anxiety”—a developmental stage during which a child experiences anxiety/fear when separated from the primary caregiver—is a common response for children whose parent becomes incarcerated. This anxiety can be heightened at young pre-verbal ages when children do not understand where their parent has gone. It can also be affected by whether children witnessed the arrest or found out about their parent’s disappearance later. Reassurance from an adult that the parent will return or that the other parent will be able to take care of the child may not have the desired effect of alleviating the fear and anxiety present. Children may worry that other important people in their lives will disappear, worry about the disappeared parent, or fear for their own safety.

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**“When my mom would call home, I used to ask her, ‘Are you alright? Are they feeding you? Do you have a blanket at night?’ I was only 8 but I was acting like I was the mother.” —Jason, age 16**

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Separation anxiety may manifest itself in nightmares, reluctance to go to daycare or school, resistance to staying alone/without a parent or guardian, or clinging behavior to a person, animal or object. A child’s fear and anxiety may be further compounded by the uncertainty inherent in the criminal justice process. One of the most burning questions that most children ask is, “When will my mommy/daddy be home?” When children or

their parents do not have control over events, cannot explain situations, or are unable to predict outcomes, fear and anxiety tend to increase greatly.

Children may also feel fear about their parents' welfare. Anxiety can stimulate children to pick up information about the more negative and frightening aspects of prison/jail and can lead them to worry about the health, safety and wellbeing of the incarcerated parent. This can lead to a shifting of roles where the child starts to parent the parent. A child's fear can be exacerbated by a lack of information or hiding information, as many children are not told the truth about where their parents are.

## SADNESS AND ISOLATION

Children separated from their parents have a tendency to feel abandoned. A child whose parent is incarcerated in most cases misses the parent. The child may develop a personal explanation for why the parent is missing and this "explanation" (especially at younger ages) may place blame on the child. For example, "If only I'd behaved better, watched less TV, studied more, prayed more," are some common blame patterns among children. This self-blaming can contribute further to the child's sadness and isolation. It can lead to children questioning their own self-worth and whether they are loveable. Children may believe if their parents really loved them, they would have found a way not to be arrested or incarcerated.

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**"My father was incarcerated and that was a very lonely time for me."**  
**—Dwight, age 15**

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Children with incarcerated parents may also feel isolated from friends. Children can be intolerant of differences, and peers may tease a child about his missing or incarcerated parent. Other peers (and adults) may not know what to say to a child about their new situation and avoid contact with the child out of their own discomfort. Children may also feel isolated by normal activities around them such as school events attended by other children's parents, or school assignments such as interviewing a parent about their family tree or having a "bring your parent to school" day. Teachers and other adults may also misunderstand a child's behavior and instead of investigating its roots or seeking counseling/support for the child, may respond in ways that further isolate and separate the child. This is particularly true for the child who turns sadness and isolation outward and expresses anger. Those who turn their feelings inward are often not seen as readily as children with behavior problems needing attention. It is very important to be alert to signs of sadness and isolation in children. Behind these symptoms could be serious questions and troubles requiring intervention.

## ANGER

Anger is a common emotion experienced by children when a parent is incarcerated, though anger can also be felt at the point of a parent's arrest. The child may be angry at

the parent for abandoning the child, or at the other parent or family members. It is very difficult for children to express their anger at the incarcerated parent since that parent is not physically present and also may be described by the family as the victim. Often the child's anger is expressed at the remaining parent or caregiver, or against teachers or other adults. In some cases, this anger can be expressed against themselves. Children can also feel a more abstract anger at what is happening, at authorities, at "the system," or at the world. They may have witnessed an arrest and be angry at the police. They may feel angry that other children have their parents at home and they don't. They may feel angry at the sentencing judge, the corrections officers, or others. This can be a frustrating anger since children rarely have enough information to form a concrete object for their anger.

Children experiencing anger as a result of the incarceration of a loved one can manifest various behaviors that can be perceived as anger, but are mostly coming from a place of hurt and sadness. When children are observed to be getting in trouble, "rebellious" or not listening, being "delinquent," or behaving differently, a signal is being sent to us that attention and understanding are needed.

## **GUILT**

Although it is not logical to an adult, children see and perceive things in a way that are naturally self-centered and they often feel they are to blame for the bad things that happen to their loved ones. A child may feel that the parent's incarceration is a result of something the child has done or said. For example, a child may think, "If I hadn't always been bothering my mom, she wouldn't have been stressed out and gone back to drugs," or "Maybe if I hadn't kept asking for a new bike, my dad wouldn't have stolen that money." When a parent is incarcerated, a child can remember and possibly exaggerate the consequences of normal childhood misbehavior and come to believe that the child's misbehavior led to or caused the parent's incarceration.

A child who internalizes responsibility for the parent's incarceration is likely to experience guilt. Guilt can cause children to feel negatively about themselves. This can result in the child shying away from or experimenting with new behaviors, challenges, or responsibilities and may lead to a decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, children who believe they are the cause of their parent's incarceration may unconsciously seek punishment through provocative or antisocial behavior.

During a parent's incarceration, children can also experience another form of guilt: that associated with being on the "outside" and living life while their parent remains locked "inside." Children can feel guilty for enjoying events and milestones that their parent cannot and may even put off certain milestones (such as graduations and trips) so that they can hopefully experience these when their parent comes home. This can also be related to sadness and helplessness (sometimes more than guilt), as children want to share these experiences with a parent who is unable to participate and be physically present in their daily world and their growing up process.

Children may experience myriad feelings and emotions related to their incarceration; some may be noticeable while others may not. Regardless, children should be observed, supported and, most importantly, listened to while they cope with this challenging time. **Anxiety, sadness, anger and guilt** are suffered by most children who are faced with parental loss. Children who are separated from their parents because of incarceration deal with the additional burden of *stigma*.

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Shirley was 8 years old when her father was arrested. She went to live with her grandmother who told her this was not her fault. Shirley's school counselor also told her this wasn't her fault. But Shirley didn't believe them. The day her father was arrested, Shirley had forgotten her keys at school and had to go to a neighbor's house. This threw everything off and she was sure that it was because of this that her dad was arrested. Shirley became very serious and sad for her age. She often walked looking down at her feet. Finally, her Grandma was able to take Shirley to visit her father. Her dad sat Shirley on his lap and told her that he made some mistakes and couldn't be home right now but that this was not her fault. Hearing it from her dad somehow made all the difference for Shirley and she felt a huge weight lifted off her. She said, "Really Dad? You're not here because I forgot my keys at school?" When she left the visit, Shirley skipped for the first time in a long time and sang a song she made up herself, "He's not mad at me...it's not my fault."

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## STIGMA AND SHAME

The stigma experienced by the families of those who commit crimes is real and it is painful. Children may find themselves subject to taunts, isolation or other rejecting behavior by peers and adults.

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"I did a presentation at my school about having a parent who is incarcerated because my father is. When I started, I asked how many kids had an incarcerated parent and 3 raised their hands. When I finished I asked the same question again and 15 said they did. It's hard to come out and talk about this." —*Jahney, age 16*

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Children whose parents are incarcerated often feel torn between their emotions:

- The child misses the parent and is angry at the parent;
- The child may admire the parent and be ashamed at the same time; and
- The child may feel loyal to and also want to reject the parent.

Taunts and rejection by others put this cauldron of emotion under intense pressure.

Children in this situation can experience anger at those who criticize their incarcerated

parent and may be moved to aggression in defense of the parent. They may also feel intense shame about the parent and move to reject and disavow their parent. Many children feel a combination of these emotions, although one feeling may be stronger at a particular time. Caregivers should be aware of the impact of loyalty conflicts imposed on the child from different viewpoints held by one's own family, especially influences such as mother of the prisoner vs. influences from the mother-in-law. Family discussion may be needed to ensure efforts are made by all family members to understand and support the child's needs.

Stigma also serves to increase the isolation felt by a child of an incarcerated parent. This is an inwardly expressed emotion and those caring for or working with children of incarcerated parents should be aware that children who are not "acting out" may be struggling as much as those who are. While children who are separated from a parent through death or divorce can find solace and support outside the family in friends, relatives or teachers, children who have a parent in prison may feel unable to seek out such support for fear of rejection. This may be especially so for children of parents whose crimes are "white collar," sex offenses, crimes against children, or high profile crimes. The language that caretakers and professionals use can unintentionally increase the isolation and stigma children experience. Frequently used terms such as "convict," "offender," and "inmate" (among others) to refer to a child's mom or dad are not helpful for children and can serve to add to the stigma and shame they feel, and further isolate them. It is much more helpful to refer to *parents* who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated *parents* or *people*, all of which recognize the humanity and parental role of the person who is incarcerated.

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*"After my dad was arrested, suddenly my best friend said I wasn't allowed to come to her house any more. She said her mom said my family was a bad influence. That really hurt...and made me mad." —Shanise, age 10*

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Because of all of this, children may be hesitant to ask for help and resist it when/if it is offered. Therefore, individuals who work with children of incarcerated parents should be aware of the reality of stigma and the potential feelings and/or behaviors associated with it. It is important to be attuned to the subtle cries for help that may lie beneath a child's behavior, moods or attitudes. Children may not know how to tell others that their father or mother is incarcerated (or that they are in foster care due to an incarceration) and may make up a story to protect themselves from the fear of embarrassment or rejection by other children.

Children need help to master a truthful and simple story about who they are and how they came to be living with someone who is not their parent or that they have a missing parent due to incarceration. A well-crafted and rehearsed "cover story" will help a child resist embellishing the truth and becoming entangled in a web of deception.

**First:** Imagine the potential questions the child may be asked by neighbors, teachers, relatives, and classmates. For example with family composition: *Where is your parent? Where are your parents? Who do you live with? Why do you live with them?*

**Second:** Review and discuss the information to be shared with the child. Children often need to know that they do not have to provide information that violates their sense of privacy or makes them uncomfortable. This is the time to construct simple responses like *"I'm living with my aunt and uncle because my other family could not take care of me and my aunt and uncle want me to live with them."*

**Third:** The family and child rehearse using declarative statements in response to a range of questions. *"It's hard to describe but we all know this is a better place for me to live."* This could also be a good time to remind them about the *Bill of Rights for Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Also refer to the section on Resentment about Deception.

## CONFUSION ABOUT VALUES

Children learn not only by what their parents tell them but also by incorporating what their parents do, who they are and how they act. Incarceration represents a serious challenge to the child's identity formation process. While a child may have heard from the parents about proper behavior and attitude, criminal activity on the part of the parent sends the child powerful, contradictory, and confusing messages. "Do as I say, not as I do," is not an effective parenting technique, as children are looking to their parents to model—not just talk about—the values and behavior expected. Careful attention must be paid by family members—and ideally by incarcerated parents themselves—to help the child work through this challenging situation. When parents can take responsibility for their actions, acknowledge poor choices, and attempt to make amends for the harm done, this can be very powerful for children.

It should be noted that a fairly large percentage of incarcerated persons are in prison for parole violations (being late to a meeting, or not getting a job quickly enough, etc.) or for addictions or minor crimes that others who commit the very same act would not be incarcerated for. This issue is at the core of the mass incarceration advocacy movement, so it is important not to lump all incarcerated parents into a category of "poor choices" but rather to delineate the reasons---and to strive to understand how these reasons contribute to a confusion of values in each child's experience.

Family members and professionals who can assist children in connecting with positive aspects of their parents can also help the children see themselves in certain aspects of the parent but not in others, thereby creating for themselves a future identity that includes their parent's strengths, but does not include their parent's criminal activity. Without these efforts on the part of parents and professionals, there is the risk that the child will identify with the parent's criminal or antisocial behavior, increasing the child's likelihood of negative outcomes.



## CONFUSION ABOUT ROLES

A frequent consequence of incarceration is that a child may be moved to occupy the place or role left vacant by the incarcerated parent. A child may be forced to become the “man or woman of the house,” to parent their siblings, provide advice to children or other adults in the family, and sometimes even to become an economic provider for the family. While children may want to help out during a time of stress and re-shifting of family responsibilities, family members and professionals working with families should be mindful that these are usually roles too big to fill and children should be protected from assuming responsibilities beyond their age-appropriate means. While easier said than done, it is important to try to protect children and to allow them to remain children through this difficult time.

## RESENTMENT ABOUT DECEPTION

As a result of the stigma discussed earlier, families faced with the reality of incarceration often try to hide the fact that they have a loved one in prison. Frequently used “cover up stories” include telling children their parents are away at school, in the military, working out of state, or in the hospital.

Though it may be well-intentioned, deception rarely succeeds, either in keeping a secret or protecting a child. Children are remarkably perceptive about what is going on around them. Instead of protecting the child from hurtful knowledge of the truth, deception tends to make the child feel more anxious, helpless, and isolated. A child who is not certain about what has happened to their parent may become preoccupied with worries and fears. In a household where the truth cannot be discussed, the child can become obsessed with thinking about the parent who has left. Children may come to believe that if adults are not telling them the truth, then the truth may be even more unbearably awful than previously thought. A child who has been told a false story about their missing parent has no outlet for their own anger, frustration, confusion and grief.

- How can a child express their feelings to the adults around them when they aren't supposed to know the story?
- If a child has been told everything is really all right, how can that child tell people that he/she is feeling upset, sad, and angry?
- And if the child is not being told the truth about their parent, how can the child trust anything they are told is truthful?

Children from whom the facts have been withheld are likely to resent those who deceived them when they find out the truth—as they almost always do.

Keep in mind that nowadays it is also possible for children to find out all about their parents through the Internet. Websites of corrections agencies generally include information about the whereabouts, criminal charges, sentence length and possible or

anticipated release dates for people in their custody. For all of these reasons, a “truth fit to tell”—one that is developmentally appropriate—is what is best for children.<sup>12</sup>

- What is told,
- How it is told,
- With what degree of detail,
- In what sequence,
- In how many conversations, are all important,
- As are the subtle nuances that take into account the developmental readiness of the child,
- The family style of communication,
- And the values of the community.

The parent or caregiver in the community (including foster parents and caseworkers when children are in foster care) can benefit from assistance in deciding what to tell children and when to tell it. This is discussed in detail in **Volume II**.<sup>13</sup> These are some of the most typical feelings and emotions experienced by children coping with the incarceration of a parent. The next section outlines some of the common behaviors and reactions of children in general, and at different points along their development.

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“As a young child I thought for a long time that my father was away in school. When my grandmother passed away (my father’s mother), he came to the funeral. It wasn’t until then, when I saw him chained and shackled, that I realized he was in prison, not school. I went up to my father to give him a hug, and the CO [correctional officer] had to remove his shackles and handcuffs in order for me to embrace him. I was young at the time but looking back now, I would have appreciated being told the truth about where my father was. It would have made me more trusting of my family then and now.” —Ryan, age 18

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<sup>12</sup> The phrase, “truth fit to tell” has been used by Nell Bernstein, author and Coordinator of the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership.

<sup>13</sup> See *Stronger Together, Volume II: Maintaining and Strengthening Family Ties for Children of Incarcerated Parents*, Section 3: Supporting Positive Visiting Experiences for Children, “Preparing Children,” pp.17-20.

# Section

# 3

## Individual Experiences, Diverse Responses

The feelings and challenges a child experiences and whether the child manifests behavior problems (and what those look like) will depend on many factors, including:

- The child's age and stage of development;
- The emotional atmosphere within the family (before the incarceration as well as after) and how well the remaining parent or caregiver is dealing with the crisis;
- How disruptive of everyday life the arrest or incarceration is (for example, whether the child enters foster care or has to change homes or schools);
- The quality of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration;
- The child's individual coping abilities;
- The nature of the crime and the length of the sentence;
- The outside support systems available to the family.

### AGE AND STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Children need different things from their parents at different stages of their lives. The child who is one or two years old is learning to develop trust in the world. Such children need to have a consistent caregiver to meet their needs reliably. A child whose parent is suddenly absent from their world may have trouble developing trust in others. At this age, a child who loses the primary caregiver will experience this as a trauma which threatens the child's future ability to attach, trust and have healthy relationships. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "An intervention that separates a child from the primary caregiver who provides psychological support should be cautiously considered and treated as a matter of urgency and profound importance."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> American Academy of Pediatrics: Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2000). Developmental issues of young children in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 106 (5). 1145-1150.

The **pre-schooler** is still very dependent on their parents but is learning independence. The tug between the need to be dependent and the desire for independence makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent. In addition, the new demands made by the outside world for self-control may lead children this age to engage in magical thinking, creating the fantasy that they are in some way responsible for the separation. Children this age (and older) may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting and other symptoms. Pre-schoolers tend to develop a strong attachment to the opposite sex parent/caregiver. If it is that parent who is incarcerated, the child may be especially angry and may express it by acting with hostility toward the remaining parent, or by directing the anger inward.

**School-age children** still place parents at the center of their world and will experience sadness (and possibly devastation if it is their primary caregiver who becomes incarcerated) at the separation. At this stage, children are beginning to understand that there are problems and solutions, but have not yet developed a mature ability to reason from one to the other. Children this age and older may be particularly vulnerable to believing that they are responsible for their parent's behavior. At this age, experiencing success and developing a sense of competence are very important. This can be threatened by taunts and bullying by classmates or family members who are aware of the parent's incarceration.

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"The hardest part of my school experiences while my father was incarcerated—and he's been incarcerated since I was 4—was not having him at my graduations, especially high school." —*Kevin, age 19*

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During the **teenage years** youth begin to develop separate identities, recognizing themselves as distinct from their parents, but at the same time often seeking their parents' approval and praise. The regard of peers is also important, and teenagers strive to fit in with "the crowd." Feeling outcast or excluded from a crowd because of a parent's incarceration can occur at this stage. Children of parents involved in the criminal justice system may also harbor fears that they too, will become just like their parent(s) based on assumptions that surround them.

At this age (and the previous ages as well), peer support and activities which connect children with other children who also have an incarcerated parent can have a powerful, positive impact.

**Children's perceptions change over time.** It should be noted that children may seem to work through or heal from the early experience; but then years later when the child has matured, they may think differently, and so the healing process may have to begin all over again.

## TRAUMA

While there is an understanding that trauma is a natural consequence of parent child separation, we know that the level of trauma has many factors to consider which will determine the impact to the child. It is important to note that behaviors exhibited by children due to trauma can often be confused with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD). Trauma has the ability to re-write neural pathways of the brain depending on the amount of stress and toxic stress and this may manifest as behaviors that are often prone to get a child in trouble. These child behaviors and experiences are perfectly reasonable and should be expected by caregivers and others who work with the child and family. The impact will vary depending on a child's response to the traumatic experience and their developmental age.

The same way that repeated trauma has the ability to re-write neural pathways that reflect the traumatic experience, research is emerging that shows that individuals can also be healed from trauma. When a person engages in mindfulness practices (meditation and yoga), counseling, and addressing attachment issues; the brain has the ability to re-write the neural pathways to reflect the repetition of these healing experiences. Mindfulness is basically cultivating our ability to pay attention in the present moment.<sup>15</sup>

## EMOTIONAL ATMOSPHERE WITHIN THE FAMILY

Most studies show that for children who exhibit the most challenging behaviors, the arrest or incarceration of the parent is only the precipitating factor.<sup>16</sup> These children have most likely already been exposed to multiple crises and stresses in the home, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, instability of living situations and negative encounters with law enforcement officials. Substance use and abuse is a significant factor in the arrest and incarceration of individuals. A recent report by the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University claims that 85% of people in prison need substance abuse treatment.<sup>17</sup> The report also notes that only 11% of individuals in prison who need treatment are receiving treatment.<sup>18</sup>

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"We all struggle with our identity. Will we become our  
parents? Is being a criminal part of who we are?"

—Khadesia, age 15

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<sup>15</sup> Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). Full Catastrophe Living.

<sup>16</sup> Different Children/Behaviors. (n.d.) In *Children of Prisoners Library CPL304*. Retrieved from <http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cpl304-different.pdf> and in [spanish http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/NAAPes\\_Folleto\\_304-1.pdf](http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/NAAPes_Folleto_304-1.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> CASA (2010) *Behind Bars II: Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*.

<sup>18</sup> CASA (2010). *Ibid*.

Addiction often affects children prior to their parent's arrest and/or incarceration. People struggling with substance abuse can be erratic and neglectful in their parenting since the nature of addiction typically places the priority on obtaining the drug. This does not mean that parents who abuse alcohol and other drugs do not love their children. Many parents continue to love and provide for their children despite their addictions and do not realize how their addiction is affecting their children. Some think they are hiding this from their children or protecting them from any effects by not consuming substances directly in front of them. Children—particularly older children—are often well aware of their parent's drug and alcohol use and worry about overdose or other harmful effects. Parental substance abuse generally affects the stability of the family and can impact the way a child reacts to his parent's incarceration (including relief at knowing where the parent is and that she will not overdose).

Children who experience the loss of one parent to incarceration will need to know that the other parent—or someone they know and love—will be able to take care of them. If it is the primary caregiver who is incarcerated, children may panic that there is no one to step in and assume this role. Thus, the way in which the remaining parent or caregiver copes with the crisis of incarceration will have a profound effect on the child. If the

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### **Justin**

After his mother's arrest, 8-year-old Justin stayed with his grandmother for two weeks. They were not a happy two weeks. Justin's grandmother was very angry with his mother. She kept talking about how she had told her to end her relationship with her boyfriend who was nothing but trouble, but she didn't listen. Justin felt lost without his mother. He had never been apart from her except for some sleepovers, and now he was afraid that he would never see her again. He was afraid to talk to his grandmother or ask her any questions. If he let her know how much he missed his mother, she might get so angry she would throw Justin out for still wanting to be with her.

His grandmother refused to take Justin to the prison to visit his mother, saying she was too old and too sick to make that stressful trip. Nevertheless, Justin spoke with his mother on the phone almost every day. Now, Justin is sitting in a social worker's office, holding a stuffed animal, rocking and talking softly to himself. His mother was recently convicted and sentenced to 10 months in jail. Justin is being placed in foster care because his grandmother isn't well and can't provide for him; she also says she can't handle Justin's behavior which she says is alternatively clingy and rebellious.

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parent who is not incarcerated or caregiver is aware of the child's emotions and needs, the child's stress will be significantly reduced. If the remaining parent or caregiver is depressed or angry or overwhelmed (all understandable), the child will pick up on the fact that the caregiver is not available and that there is no one to care for him/her. If caregivers also complain to the child or take their anger out on the child, the stress and trauma experienced by the child is worsened. When caregivers who are strangers to the child step in—foster parents or unknown friends or relatives—children's anxiety, fear, and stress can be greatly increased, and professional intervention may be needed (particularly for young children).

## **LEVEL OF DISRUPTION**

The disruption a child experiences will depend in part on how much the arrest or incarceration of a parent alters the child's everyday life. Perhaps the child's remaining caregiver will have to go to work for the first time or may have to quit their job to stay home with younger children. Another possibility is that the family may be forced to move from their home to live with relatives or friends, possibly causing the children to miss school or change schools. The most disruptive case often is when a child has to go into foster care. Typically, the more a child's everyday reality (caretakers, neighborhood, school) changes, the more difficult it will be for the child to cope with the arrest or incarceration of a parent.

## **INDIVIDUAL COPING ABILITY**

Each child is unique, each family different, and the role of each child within a family varies. Children who appear to face similar situations, with parents facing similar changes, may react in widely-different ways to their parent's arrest and incarceration. Children—even within the same family—may respond in different ways, based on temperament, personality, age, prior experiences, level of attachment to the parent, and coping styles.

It is important to be aware that those children who seem to be coping quite well with a parent's arrest or incarceration may be silently suffering intense emotions. While the behavior may seem ordinary, all children undergoing the stress of having a parent involved in the criminal justice system are feeling one or more of the emotions—sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and the pain of stigma—triggered by their parent's incarceration. A child whose behavior seems normal may need just as much support as a child who is obviously depressed, anxious, or angry.

Children have different levels of resiliency, which is an internal mechanism that causes children to react differently. The child's level of resiliency is reflected in how long that child takes to be able to recover from a situation. For example, one child may "bounce back" quicker while another sibling may struggle longer and need additional support to deal with the same situation.

## GRIEF AND LOSS

It is important to understand the various forms of grief and loss which impact the child and family. Arditti (2012) found the following:

Further contributing to the offender's distress is the nature of the losses suffered by the parent and his or her family. Parental incarceration is associated with ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) and disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989). Ambiguous loss within the context of parental incarceration leads to uncertain parental roles and painful family relationships (Brodsky, 1975). For many prisoners, incarceration has been described as a "living death"---"the death of the social, the familial, the spiritual" (McCulloch & Scraton, 2008, p. 17). As one inmate parent conveys in a poem to his son: "*Because I'm not there, I do not exist*" (Vendlinski, 2003, p. 32, emphasis added). For family members, the living death is a significant and ambiguous loss in that the incarcerated parent is "alive but unreachable" (Jucovy, 2003, p. 2). This living death of the parent can be devastating to families because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and invalidated by the community. The lack of supportive rituals and community verification contributes to parental distress and family difficulties (Arditti et al., 2003; Doka, 1989) and can be far more painful than other types of loss (see Boss, 1999). (p. 37)<sup>19</sup>

The degree of previous loss and trauma experienced by the child prior to the parent's incarceration also affects the child's coping ability. Cumulative losses take their toll on a child's resilience and ability to endure and bounce back.<sup>20</sup> Few children receive adequate support in resolving the grief they experience when separated from their incarcerated parent. Families often need help to facilitate the grieving process and understand the role of grief and past attachments to support long-term adjustment. Caregivers deserve to have both knowledge and emotional support to enable them to help the child through their grief process. The caregiver may also be experiencing their own unresolved grief and should attempt to be aware of the impact this may have on the child.

It is helpful to understand the stages of grief to assist the caregiver in this process. According to Vera I. Fahlberg, M.D. in *A Child's Journey Through Placement*,<sup>21</sup> children may experience:

### Stages of Grieving

- **Shock**
- **Denial** - the child may be prone to appetite and sleep disturbances as well as having problems paying attention. The child may either overeat or have little appetite. The child may sleep excessively or have trouble getting to sleep at all.

<sup>19</sup> Arditti, J.A. (2012). Parental Incarceration and the Family: Psychological and Social Effects on Children, Parents and Caregivers. New York University Press. <http://nyupress.org/books/9780814705124/>

<sup>20</sup> New York City Early Childhood Mental Health Strategic Work Group. (2004). *Promoting the mental health and healthy development of New York's infants, toddlers, and preschoolers: A call to action*. New York, NY:Author.

<sup>21</sup> Fahlberg, V.I., (1991). *A Child's Journey Through Placement*. Perspective Press, Indianapolis Indiana



Nightmares may be frequent and forgetfulness is common. The child is not being resistant or manipulative when the child experiences problems with memory or paying attention. These problems are beyond the child's conscious control. Energies are diverted to coping with pain of separation and loss and little energy is available to put into processing what is going on in the here and now.

- **Anger** - the next 3 stages may occur in any order and may indeed recycle. Anger is commonly displaced onto others such as, foster parents, peers, siblings or caregivers. Minor stimuli are apt to lead to angry outbursts. In trying to regain some sense of control over one's own destiny, the grieving individual is likely to escalate ordinary requests into control issues.
- **Bargaining** - reflects the magical egocentric thinking which accompanies most losses, but is especially prominent during the years 3-5 and in adolescence. It frequently takes the form of promises. "If only....then I promise I will...."
- **Sadness/Despair** - During sadness and despair tears come easily. The child may look sad and withdrawn. Clinging and increased dependence may emerge.
- **Resolution** - for children of incarcerated parents or children in the foster care system is acceptance of having two sets of parents or caregivers. The acceptance is an emotional rather than intellectual basis. Once the separation or loss has been accepted, the grieving individual once again has energy for continued growth and change. During the grief process a tremendous amount of psychological, and sometimes physical, energy is diverted into coping with strong emotions. Less energy is available for day-to-day relationships and the tasks associated with normal childhood development. Without help in completing the grief process, delays in emotional development become common. Again, resolution means acceptance; it does not mean that the child has to like what happened to this child. The child never has to like it, but until the child accepts it, this child will be limited in the progress the child is able to make in other areas of the child's life.

**Cultural Factors** may facilitate or inhibit movement through the stages of the grief process. In general, American culture reinforces the "stiff upper lip" (or suck it up) mode of coping and gives little permission for full expression of tumultuous emotions, either in children or adults. In addition, there are cultural expectations which encourage members of each sex to become stuck in different stages of the grief process. For example, boys from a very young age are frequently given the message, "Big boys don't cry." Therefore it is more likely for the male child to get stuck in the anger stage. On the other hand, females in our society from a very young age are given messages that simultaneously inhibit their directing anger outwardly and reinforce their being open about sadness. Therefore it is more likely for female children and women to bypass the anger phase and move directly to sadness and despair.

Caregivers may need to consult mental health professionals such as social workers or counselors for assistance to help the child work through this process. Many caregivers report that mental health professionals are not experienced dealing with this type of loss resulting in child and caregiver frustration, so it is suggested that caregivers share this

guide with their therapists. This guide is also available through the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. In addition, therapists may expand clinical knowledge with use of references to resources cited in both volumes.

However, once the resistance to moving into the next phase of the grief process is overcome the individual who was previously stuck is usually able to move through this new phase quite rapidly. Usually it takes a combination of repeatedly helping the grieving child overcome his magical thinking by helping the child face reality again and again plus considerable supportive confrontation to overcome the resistance to coping with pain, to get the child to be able to continue progress through the grief cycle to resolution (pp 164-166, Vera I. Fahlberg). The goal for professional social workers and other clinicians should be to help families define their losses, assess their resources, and develop meaningful narratives about the loss.

## NATURE OF THE CRIME AND LENGTH OF SENTENCE

The stigma of a parent's arrest can vary with the type of crime charged (including whether it was a high profile crime receiving media attention) and the child's social context. When a parent is charged with a sexually-based crime or a child-related crime, their children may experience intense and confusing feelings; parents are supposed to protect a child from harm, not inflict harm. In fact, people in prison for sexually-based and child-related crimes represent a small sliver of the population, but they receive enormous attention and have extreme stigma attached to them. While it is generally assumed that no parent-child contact is best in these cases, children (particularly older children) may want supported, therapeutic contact at some point to help them process and heal. This requires careful assessment and re-assessment over time (see **Volume II** for a detailed discussion about visiting).

The length of sentence can also affect how a child copes with a parent's incarceration. Time moves more slowly for children than it does for adults. A sentence of one year may seem like a very, very long time. A sentence of four years can be an eternity. A sentence of eight years for a young child is literally unfathomable. Generally, the longer the child is separated from the parent, the more difficult it will be for that child. It is also extremely important to be aware of how time is discussed with younger children. It is best to avoid commonly thrown around phrases such as, "Mom will be home *soon*," because "soon" to an adult can refer to one year, while to a child, he/she may wake up the next day expecting their mom to be home. This is also important to discuss with incarcerated parents who may want to reassure their children that they will be home soon, but can end up disappointing or misleading them.

According to one child whose father was incarcerated for much of her life, "Many people think we're doing a service to children, when a parent is doing life, in having them sever

contact. But as children, we understand who we are as human beings by understanding who our parents are.”<sup>22</sup>

## OUTSIDE SUPPORTS

Outside supports can assist children in coping with the pain of their parent’s absence. These supports can be individuals, school counselors, social workers, teachers, community programs, faith-based groups, and mentoring programs. These supports can be financial, logistical, social or emotional. A grandmother, favorite aunt or uncle, or teacher can play an important role in supplying a child with *some* of the supportive needs that are not being met by the incarcerated parent and can help the current parent or caregiver cope with the incarceration of a parent. A peer support group or community program, particularly one that discusses parental incarceration openly and nonjudgmentally, can provide young people with a sense of belonging and normalcy that may be lacking in other aspects of their lives.

Caregivers who reach out to their child's school or school mentoring programs will find a resource that can provide additional support to their child. While it can be helpful to the child for caregiver's to share information with the school, the caregiver must decide whether it is "safe" to disclose this information and can request that the school handle this information with appropriate confidentiality. However, there is risk to declining to disclose. Too often, a child's acting out from trauma can be misrepresented, punished, and even lead to an inappropriate educational label of ADHD or Emotionally Disturbed. In addition, the school may have resources to offer, such as a school social worker or counselor led support group for Children of Incarcerated Parents or a mentor through the *Seedling Foundation* mentoring program.

## AVOID ASSUMPTIONS

Because arrests occur with greater frequency in some communities than others, it is often assumed that children in high incarceration communities are less stigmatized and better able to talk about—and get support for—their circumstances. These assumptions are not supported by research or experience.

<sup>22</sup> Quoting Emani Davis, Bernstein, N. (2005), *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (p. 95). New York, NY: The New Press.

# Section

# 4

## What Can You Do?

*For parents, caregivers and individuals engaged with children during and after their parents' arrest and incarceration, it is important to understand the many feelings children will have, as well as how these may be expressed in their behaviors and activities. But understanding is not enough; actions are what will make the difference.*

### Here are some concrete ways you can support children:

#### **ACKNOWLEDGE/VALIDATE THE EXPERIENCE:**

Children need to have an adult acknowledge their painful and conflicted feelings. Remember, although an adult may be well intentioned when telling a child not to worry, or responding by minimizing the loss expressed, or deceiving a child about the parent's actual circumstances, what helps children is validating their experiences, their feelings, fears, anger, and guilt. It is most important that we listen and respond with age-appropriate truths, when possible. Providing "answers" is not as important.

#### **BE AWARE OF POTENTIAL EMOTIONS/REACTIONS:**

You should be aware that the child need not have been living with the parent who has been arrested or incarcerated to feel a range of strong emotions. Ask open-ended questions about her feelings, like "Are you thinking a lot about your mom/dad these days? Do you want to talk about it?" Allow children to express their feelings. Respond to the feelings expressed; don't tell children what they should be feeling.

#### **DON'T LECTURE, BUT RATHER ASK QUESTIONS:**

Ask whether anything is bothering the child. You might say that you noticed a change in behavior. "You're usually the first one out on the basketball court and now I don't see you. Is anything up?" Or, "You got a C on this paper. It's not like you to hand in this kind of work." Or, "Is everything all right at home?" Or, "You are so quiet and seem sad. Is there something I can do?"

## **PROACTIVELY SIGNAL THAT YOU ARE SOMEONE (OPEN AND NONJUDGMENTAL) THEY CAN TALK TO ABOUT INCARCERATION:**

Post the *Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights* (see page 6) in your office or worksite where children can see it. Include mention of parental incarceration on intake forms, in examples used when talking about stressors children face, and more. Your acknowledgment of this issue will make it much easier and safer for children and youth to talk about their own parent's incarceration.

There will be times when a child denies that anything is wrong. It may be that the child does not truly know what has happened to their parent or that they have been told not to tell anyone, or that the child had a negative experience with a helping professional or adult to whom the child disclosed in the past.

### **Some important points to keep in mind:**

- If you can't determine the cause of the child's change in behavior or demeanor by asking the child, you might consider approaching their parent or other caregiver, as you normally would in dealing with a child's problem.
- It is wise to focus on your perceptions of how the child has changed and not to suggest any particular cause. If the family does not want to tell you that the parent has been incarcerated, you may alienate them by suggesting any such thing.
- A family that will admit to you that a parent has been arrested, but does not want the child to know, may benefit from suggestions about how to tell the child an age-appropriate truth and why this is important (the benefits of doing so) (See **Volume II**, Section 2).

## **PROMOTE HEALTHY FAMILIES:**

The primary responsibility for the development and well-being of children lies within the family. There are things you can do to help whether you are an incarcerated parent, the parent who is not incarcerated, a caregiver, social worker, educator, neighbor or other community support. All families have strengths and this is where you start and build on those strengths.

### **Healthy families should:**

- Strive for clear, open and frequent communication,
- Provide encouragement to individual family members,
- Express appreciation for each other,
- Maintain a commitment to family,
- Participate in religious or spiritual orientation,
- Develop social connections to external resources,
- Support each other's abilities to adapt to stressors,

- Establish and maintain clear roles and routines in the family, and
- Spend time together that is of high quality.

**If you are the incarcerated parent:**

- Reinforce the efforts of the caregiver who is taking care of your children,
- Find ways to follow the items from this **Healthy Family** list above and know that this can help you keep your focus while incarcerated and upon release with family reintegration,
- Let your children know that you value their education and well-being (ask them what they are learning in school and pursue education and vocational skills while incarcerated),
- Don't let incarceration be a reason not to let your children know that you disapprove of choices that can create problems for them,
- Don't let incarceration keep you from knowing what's going on in your child's life and for letting them know that you are proud of them,
- Strive to learn skills that will help you contribute to your family while incarcerated and upon release (parenting, self-development, spiritual and employment skills) and let your family know of these efforts, and
- Know that it is never too late to contribute to a better life for yourself and your children.

## RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOU

Additional resources are available on the **Texas Inmate Families Association (TIFA)** website at [www.tifa.org](http://www.tifa.org). TIFA provides support in the form of chapter meetings throughout Texas. Information is also made available through speaker presentations, parole packet workshops, summer camps, and other support.

TDCJ GO Kids internet Resources, <http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/gokids/index.html> this site includes free children's summer camps sponsored by faith-based and community organizations, as well as other resources such as mentoring programs in your community.

National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, Children of Prisoners Library is extensive with resources for caregivers and health care providers (English and Spanish), Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director, Rutgers University  
<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/library/children-of-prisoners-library>