

What Educators and Schools Need to Know When Working with Children with Incarcerated Parents

Children with incarcerated parents are often invisible in their schools-- when their issues surface they are often masked by other symptoms such as school failure, absenteeism, social isolation, depression, anxiety or other acting-out behaviors. These children are at higher than average risk of engaging in criminal activity than their peers and for becoming incarcerated themselves. Research shows children with incarcerated parents are five times more likely to serve time in prison when they are adults in comparison to children whose parents are not incarcerated.

It is estimated that between 2 and 5 million children have a parent in prison in this country and over 10 million kids have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their lives. As a group, these children are far less likely to succeed in school and more likely to succumb to substance abuse, gangs, and delinquency.

Just as children might experience trauma from the separation of divorce, abandonment, or the death of a parent, children with incarcerated parents often experience separation trauma as well. Research indicates these children are left emotionally scarred and stigmatized-- by their parent's actions, and by the shame of their parent's situation. Children's responses to parental imprisonment are varied-- absent positive intervention, the emotional and behavioral consequences can be severe. Children with incarcerated parents experience many negative effects on their emotional health and well-being. Fear, embarrassment, shame, anger, depression, worry, sadness, loneliness, and guilt are some of the emotional problems that children can have. These children may also act out inappropriately, become disruptive in the classroom, and exhibit other academic/school-related difficulties. What's more, these children are at increased risk for drug abuse, gang involvement, early pregnancy and delinquency. They may be teased and taunted or subjected to other rejecting behavior, not only by their peers but also by adults.

Their substitute caregivers may also affect these children's feelings. Many caregivers experience shame and uncertainty about how to deal with parental incarceration, leading them to encourage and maintain family secrecy and deception-- denying the children an outlet in which to express their grief and anger and increasing their vulnerability. The fear of rejection and stigma attached to parental incarceration can make it difficult for children and their caregivers to share this issue with friends, teachers or others who may be helpful to them.

The school setting provides the unique opportunity to identify and reach out to this at-risk population. The good news is that the Nation's schools and its educators, including teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, athletic coaches, and support staff, can make a positive impact on the problem. Here's why:

Educators and school administrators can play a critical part in identifying and supporting children in their schools and classroom who have a parent in prison, in order to serve as a source of information and support in a number of critical ways.

Children who cope effectively with separation from a parent often rely on the support from a relationship with caring adult (grandparent, teachers, or others).

Educators can remediate specific areas of vulnerability, guide kids through the indifference and instill a sense of hope and future in children and families who would otherwise give up.

The promotion of self-esteem and self-efficacy is probably the key to effective intervention for any high-risk individual.

Students who can identify one adult in their lives whom they trust and admire are less likely to engage in risky behaviors than those who cannot.

Changing the Conversation

On the national level, there has been a recent surge of interest in incarcerated parents and the way this situation affects children families, and communities. This interest is reflected in a series of grants recently funded by the federal government for research in this area, as well as the surge in news media interest over the last decade. The purpose of What Educators and Schools Need to Know When Working with Children with Incarcerated Parents is to help support the hard work already being done nationwide by private and public agencies. The goal is to enhance national awareness about the toll parental incarceration exacts on America's children, and to generate a greater national urgency to rethink mass incarceration as the answer to crime. An educated and informed public will help create a more positive and supportive environment for all our children!

Educators and school administrators who want to make a difference can take action using four key guidelines:

Change Personal Attitudes. Educators and school administrators have an influence on children and how they perceive the world around them. Thus, their actions, what they teach, what they say, and how they say it are extremely meaningful. Educators and school administrators can affect their students' knowledge of, and attitudes and behaviors toward, children with incarcerated parents -- and those of the surrounding community as well.

Build School and Community Partnerships. Educators and school administrators must view the school in which they work, as well as the community in which it operates, as a partner in the effort to confront the popular myths and stereotypes and reduce the stigma attached to parental incarceration. Such partnerships can create positive solutions and systems of support of children and their families.

Collect Data. Schools can collect data using a variety of means, including community forums, surveys, and questionnaires. Administrators can then design programs to screen and reach this vulnerable population.

Commit to Quality. As key information and referral sources for children who may need support in coping with parental incarceration, educators, their staff, and school administrators need to establish consistent communications and collaborations with community resources.

To accomplish these objectives, educators, school administrators, and school systems can take a number of very specific steps. Here are just a few for your consideration.

Making a Difference in the Classroom

Do what you do best - educate. Learn all you can about children with incarcerated parents and the effects of parental incarceration. Then take that knowledge and share it with others whenever and wherever you can. If you are an administrator, encourage your staff members to learn as much as they can about the circumstances and needs of children with incarcerated parents and their families. There are a number of organizations that can help you. (See attached list for contact information.)

Understand and acknowledge your own feelings about incarcerated parents. Unless you take this step, you may undermine your own efforts to help.

Be mindful of what you say and how you say it. Public perceptions and attitudes about crime and people who are incarcerated are largely fueled by news media hype. However, the challenges faced by the children and families left behind are often overlooked but very real. When speaking about these individuals and issues, be mindful of the bias in the language you use.

Support, normalize and validate feelings about parental incarceration. Foster children's self-esteem. Let students know that you are there for them and that it is OK to ask for help. Remind them that they are lovable, competent, and important. Understand that the child may be grieving. Explain the stages of grief to the child in an age-appropriate way.

Challenge ignorance. As a role model for your students, respond to ignorance immediately and sincerely. Encourage in-service training for staff and students about the rise in incarceration, particularly as a result of the war on drugs, mandatory minimum sentencing, and its impact on students.

Don't try it alone. Learn about and refer to community organizations. Identify and collaborate with local agencies with expertise or experience in helping children with incarcerated parents.

Help preserve the child's connection to the parent. Regardless of the parent's past actions, he or she plays a central role in the child's world and influences that child's well-being and future development.

Stigma and shame keep many children from seeking the help they need. Shame is caused by the negativity and misunderstanding that often surrounds parental incarceration, and this in turn causes unnecessary pain and confusion.

Making a Difference: What You Can Do

If you know of a child in your school or classroom who seems extremely upset - perhaps someone who displays extreme mood changes -- the time is now to act, help, notify, and inform. The child may well have an incarcerated parent, and you might be surprised how much you can accomplish through understanding, hope, and friendship.

Scrutinize your situation. If you are an administrator, set up a staff meeting early in the school year to take careful inventory children with incarcerated parents in your school. If you are an educator or other school staff person, encourage your administrator to do so; many schools do not recognize that parental incarceration is a serious problem among their students. Talk with members of the student body, even if it's just one on one and in private.

Join forces to educate and inform. Schools can reach out to community groups, health providers, and service providers to create partnerships aimed at educating and informing others about the issues and needs of children with incarcerated parents. Hold a school assembly or grade- or class-specific discussion to talk about the impact of parental incarceration. Encourage students to engage in conversations about the issues, and let them know where they can go for help.

Communicate with parents/caregivers. Schedule evening programs for parents/caregivers, grandparents, step-parents, and foster parents to learn more about the impact of parental incarceration. Tell them the signs to look for in children. Inform them about resources available in the community to help them and their kids deal with this issue.

Create and/or promote student support groups at your school. Peer support groups can be a key component in the life of a child who is coping with parental incarceration. Schools provide a perfect opportunity to create and/or promote student support groups and to reinforce their effectiveness in improving the lives of those who participate in them.

Why Should You Care?

Because children go to school carrying their burdens with them! These problems can only be addressed successfully when everyone - school, home, and the broader community - works together.

The harmful effects of parental incarceration can often linger long into the adult years. The high costs can be seen in increased expenditures for welfare, social services, the courts and the criminal justice system. There is also a cost in terms of wasted productivity and missed opportunities for both children and society. Most importantly, there is the immeasurable price paid in human dignity.

Without the support of preventative and appropriately targeted services, these risk factors can lead to crisis and in some cases result in lasting effects that perpetuate the cycle of deprivation, social exclusion, and poverty.

All facets of a child's well-being affect his or her potential for academic success.

Children with incarcerated parents reflect the racial disparities of the U.S. criminal justice system. African American children are nearly nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent in prison than white children. Similarly, Latino children are three times as likely as white children to have a parent in prison⁶.

Many public and private organizations that serve these families, including health care, child welfare, and mental health agencies, as well as schools and courts, do not have protocols and programs in place to guide and inform service provision for children with incarcerated parents.

Children with incarcerated parents often suffer from anxieties that lead to poor school performance, depression, isolation, resentment, and acting-out behaviors. These problems become very apparent in school settings when they are not addressed in a comprehensive manner.

Urban schools, confront complex emotional and social problems. The past decade has seen a variety of social ills escalate, including drug abuse, family violence, homelessness, and a continually rising prison population. As a result, the number of children with incarcerated parents has increased rapidly.

Helping a child begins with relationships! This is the most powerful tool we have to help children heal from traumatic experiences.

When kids know that an adult cares enough about them to hold them responsible for their actions, it builds accountability!

Through the work of caring individuals, children have a chance for a positive future. So when you think to yourself, "What can one person do?" In the case of child with an incarcerated parent, you can do more than you'll ever know.

If you've ever wanted to make a difference in a child's life, now is the time. A child is waiting and you have the power to help. Please consider becoming an advocate for child in need and bring hope back into a child's life.

Working With Children & Families:

How Can I Help? A Three- Volume Series on Serving Special Children. Volume I: Working with Children of Incarcerated Parents. Volume II: Sustaining & Enhancing Family Ties. Volume III: Resources for Supporting the Children of Incarcerated Parents. Developed by The Osborne Association, 135 E. 15th Street, New York, NY 10003 212) 673-6633

Children On Hold: Improving the Response to Children Whose Parents are Arrested and Incarcerated.

American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law. <http://www.abanet.org/child>

740 15th Street, N.W., Washington DC 20005. Phone: 202-662-1720

Working with Children and Families Separated by Incarceration

Cynthia Beatty Seymour, Lois Wright

The Child Welfare League of America, 440 First St., N.W., Suite 310, Washington DC 20001

Why Punish the Children? A Reappraisal of the Children of Incarcerated Mothers of America.

National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

685 Market St., Suite 620, San Francisco, CA., 94105, Phone: 415-896-6223

Parents in Prison, Children in Crisis.

written by CWLA's Cynthia Beatty Seymour

The Child Welfare League of America, 440 First St., N.W., Suite 310, Washington DC 20001

When A Parent Goes To Jail: A Comprehensive Guide for Counseling Children of Incarcerated Parents (For Ages 10-14)

Rebecca M. Yaffe, Lonnie F. Hoade, Barbara S. Moody (Illustrator)

Materials for Children With Incarcerated Parents

I Know How You Feel Because This Happened to Me & Just for You - Children with Incarcerated Parents. Center for Children with Incarcerated Parents, Pacific Oaks College and Children's Programs, 714 West California Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91105.

Two in Every Hundred: a special workbook for children with a parent in prison
Reconciliation, 702 51st Avenue North, Nashville, TN 37209, (615) 292-6371.

When Andy's Father Went to Prison by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Albert Whitman and Company, 5747 Howard Street, Niles, IL 606487-4012, ISBN #0-8075-8874-1.

Breaking Out, Barthe Declements, August 1993

Help for Kids! Understanding Your Feelings About Having a Parent in Prison or Jail Craig, Kevin, Josselyn, Alan, Brittney, with Bonnie Ayer and Amy Biegelow.

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3. Wright, L.E. & Seymour, C.B. (2000). Working with children and families separated by incarceration. A handbook for child welfare agencies. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.
4. Seymour, C. (1998) "Children with parents in prison: Child welfare policy, program and practice issues." Child Welfare , 77, p.473.
5. ibid
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HOPE HOUSE is a not-for-profit organization that provides an array of innovative programs that strengthen ties between District inmates who are incarcerated in prisons outside of the D.C. area and their families in Washington; advocate for and raise the level of awareness among the general public about inmate issues and concerns; provide support groups and other projects for the children and wives of D.C. prisoners which assist them in dealing with separation from their loved ones. It is our purpose to present facts, foster awareness and create support for constructive action in regard to children with incarcerated parents.

