

Tip Sheet for Teachers (Pre-K through 12)

Supporting Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

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School staff make a difference in the lives of all children, including children of incarcerated parents. For the child with a parent in prison, a safe and supportive school can provide a caring, stable setting offering opportunities for educational, social, and emotional development. The bonds and relationships fostered at school with peers and trusted adults play a vital role in the child's short and long term learning and maturation.

Five Things to Know About Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

- 1. Children with an incarcerated parents may be in your classroom.** 2.7 million (or 1 in 28) children currently have an incarcerated parent. More than 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their childhoods. Given these numbers, there may be a child in your classroom or school who has an incarcerated parent.¹ Women are a fast growing part of the correctional population (the number of incarcerated women increased at nearly 1.5 times the rate of men between 1980 and 2010).² If your student's mother has been incarcerated, there is an increased likelihood of instability in that student's home and an increased chance that student may enter foster care or have to move to another caregiver's home (such as a grandparent).³
- 2. Having an incarcerated parent is recognized as an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE).** Exposure to multiple ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of long-term negative behavioral and physical health outcomes.⁴ Adding to the trauma, many of these children have witnessed their parent's arrest. One study of parents arrested indicated that 67% were handcuffed in front of their children, 27% reported weapons drawn in front of their children, and 4.3% reported a physical struggle.⁵ Although it is not always the case, trauma often affects a child's physiological and emotional responses; ability to think, learn, and concentrate; impulse control; self-image; and relationships with others.
- 3. Children with a parent in prison may be subject to stereotypes and subconscious negative assumptions.** People sometimes assume children with an incarcerated parent will engage in criminal or negative activity like their parent. Be careful about making

assumptions about behavior, motivation, academic ability, and potential. Research indicates that these assumptions, even when done subconsciously, can have detrimental impacts on educational outcomes.⁶ Children who have an incarcerated parent, like any students, have great potential to learn and succeed in school when teachers support them and establish high expectations for them.⁷

- 4. Be sensitive to certain trigger issues.** When having conversations about current events, crime, criminals, or the police, be mindful of how children with a parent who has been arrested or incarcerated may feel. Children love their parents, even if a parent did something illegal. Be careful about making statements about parental involvement because Dad may not be there to sign permission slips, or Mom may not be there to help with homework. Across all school settings, pay particular attention to children of incarcerated parents being bullied by peers, and help ensure that they are not subjected to biases or stereotypes.⁶
- 5. Be aware of what researchers call the "conspiracy of silence."**⁸ This conspiracy refers to the fact that many caregivers intentionally do not tell children that their parent is incarcerated, deciding instead to explain the absence by saying the parent is sick, away at work or college, or serving time in the military. For children who know their parent is incarcerated, their caregiver may have instructed them to not discuss the situation with anyone, for fear of the stigma and shame associated with incarceration. The child, too, may worry about people judging their parent. However, not understanding the situation or not being able to talk about it can also be a source of stress for children. Sometimes the silence around the situation can become an inadvertent cause of shame. It is important for teachers to understand this dynamic. If a teacher knows that a child has an incarcerated parent, the teacher should be careful not to discuss that information with the child unless confident the child has already been informed. If it appears the child understands the situation and would like to confide in someone, it is important for teachers to signal that they can be trusted, will not judge the parent or the child for loving their parent, and will keep the information the child chooses to disclose confidential.⁹



How Can Teachers Contribute to Positive Outcomes for Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent?

Teachers can **collaborate** with the child's other parent, family member, or caregiver to create a positive school setting for children of incarcerated parents.

Collaboration may include:

- Sharing relevant information with caregivers concerning successes and struggles, as well as emotional and behavioral concerns; and
- Becoming aware of community organizations and services available to meet the specialized needs of children with a parent in prison, especially mental health resources.

Teachers can **assist** children who have an incarcerated parent in reaching their potential and achieving academic and social success by:

- Implementing behavioral and academic supports that enhance the teaching-learning process;
- Engaging in classroom methods and approaches that help students with an incarcerated parent increase their capacities to self-regulate behaviors and develop their academic promise;
- Challenging students with a parent in prison to do their very best academically by providing support and establishing and promoting high expectations for them; and
- Identifying areas of vulnerability and understanding that negative behaviors and absenteeism may be masking anxiety and depression, which can result from childhood trauma.

Teachers can **advocate** for children with an incarcerated parent and educate their colleagues on ways to address the specific needs of students who have an incarcerated parent by:

- Establishing themselves as trusted and caring adults, serving as role models and challenging the stigma and shame that can be associated with parental incarceration;
- Working with other support/ancillary staff (i.e., art teacher, classroom aide, reading specialist, administrators) to provide one-on-one opportunities for students with a parent in prison to express feelings openly and freely through art, writing, or any other form of free expression. For example, the children could write a letter, draw a picture, or write a poem to share with their parent;
- Collaborating with school-based mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists, counselors, or social workers) who understand the developmentally-sensitive implications of parental incarceration and family stress on child well-being; and
- Asking librarians to offer books/pamphlets about parental incarceration and encourage ALL students to read them, rather than singling out students with an incarcerated parent.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility*. Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts.
- ² Guerino, P., Harrison, P. M., & Sabol, W. (2011). *Prisoners in 2010*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ³ Glaze, L., & Maruschak, L. (2008). *Parents in prison and their minor children*. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁴ Felitti, V. J., et al. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), pp 245-258.
- ⁵ Phillips, S. D. (1998). Programming for children of female offenders. Proceedings from 4th National Head Start Research Conference. Washington, DC. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5, 677-702.
- ⁶ Dallaire, D. H. (2010). Teachers' experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31(4), pp 281-290.
- ⁷ Hinnant, J. B., O'Brien, M., & Ghazarian, S. R. (2009). The longitudinal relations of teacher expectations to achievement in the early school years. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(3), pp 662-670.
- ⁸ Jose-Kampfner, C. (1995). Post-traumatic stress reactions in children of imprisoned mothers. In K. Gabel, & D. Johnston (Eds.) *Children of Incarcerated Parents* (pp 89-100). New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- ⁹ Hairston, C.F. (2007). Focus on the children with incarcerated parents: A overview of the research literature. Annie E. Casey Foundation.

RELATED RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

Children of Incarcerated Parents. Children of Incarcerated Parents Federal Website.

<http://www.youth.gov/coip>

Parents Behind Bars: Children of Incarcerated Family Members: An Educator and Caregiver's Toolkit to Idaho's Criminal Justice System.

http://www.idoc.idaho.gov/content/story/top_news/how_teachers_can_help_children_of_incarcerated_parents_0

Supporting Students with Incarcerated Parents. Rossen, Eric. Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (Also available in Spanish.)

<http://www.nctsn.net/resources/audiences/school-personnel/trauma-toolkit>

Top 10 Things Every Teacher Should Know About Children of Incarcerated Parents. Project AVARY (Alternative Ventures for At Risk Youth).

<http://www.projectavary.org/resourcesforteachers.html>

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

<http://www.spac.k12.pa.us>