



# Children of Prisoners LIBRARY

[www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

**Children of Prisoners Library** Here are just a few documents from the Children of Prisoners Library. Many more pamphlets can be found on their [website](http://www.fcnetwork.org))

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<a href="http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL204-TipsFromCaregivers.html">Tips from Caregivers to Caregivers</a>	<a href="http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL204-TipsFromCaregivers.html">http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL204-TipsFromCaregivers.html</a>
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**Children of Prisoners Library** <http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/cplindex.html>

More than one in forty children in the United States has a parent in prison. The loss of a parent to incarceration means a crisis for that child. Concerned people in all settings are dealing with children of prisoners and their caregivers daily, but in most cases without benefit of training or specific information. To help meet this need, Family and Corrections Network has created a new resource—the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), an Internet based resource at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). CPL provides free information sheets designed for people serving children of prisoners and their caregivers.

**Introduction to Children of Prisoners** CPL 101

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL101-Introduction.htm>

Adapted from **Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide** by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.

By Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin

**There are over 2 million prisoners in the United States.**

Over the last 30 years, the U.S. prison population has increased by 500%. When someone goes to prison, their family members become invisible victims. While each family's experience is unique, there are some common themes.

Many families find that, at a time when help is most needed, people seem to withdraw from them. There is often a sense of shame and a fear of being labeled. Many in our society view prisoner's families as guilty by association.

Many families were already short on money before their loved one's incarceration and now are plunged into a struggle for economic survival.

The justice system and its procedures are often baffling and frustrating.

Maintaining ties between prisoners and their families is difficult at best. Visiting conditions are usually stressful. Prisons are typically located in remote areas, not served by public transportation. Ties outside blood or marriage may not be recognized by the system. Self-confidence can be undercut by friends, family and society members who criticize a relationship with a prisoner.

When visits do occur, the happy and unhappy feelings and events of day-to-day life seem hard to talk about.

Over time, un-connectedness can overtake relationships. This is especially hard for children.

### **One in forty children in the United States has a parent in prison.**

Children of prisoners are often present at their parent's arrest. Many times, children of prisoners are not told the truth about where their incarcerated parent is. This leaves children confused and questioning. Children with parents in prison imagine all kinds of explanations and answers. They feel vulnerable, unprotected and at fault. When children blame themselves for the loss of a parent to jail or prison, they may rebel or withdraw. They are often afraid to talk to anyone about their situation, limiting the ability of others to understand and help.

There are relatively few agencies or programs to help these millions of families. There is no government agency charged with specific responsibility for the impact of the criminal justice system on families and children.

This impact on families has been described as a *series of crises*: from arrest, to trial, incarceration, and re-entry (Fishman and Alissi, 1979). Each of these crises can diminish a family's capacity to care for and support its members.

To help, Family and Corrections Network has created this new resource—the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), an Internet based resource at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). CPL provides free information sheets aimed at health care providers and others serving children of prisoners and their caregivers.

CPL pamphlets describe the challenges facing children of prisoners, strategies for intervention, and tips for fostering trust. CPL also provides extensive additional resources: agencies serving children and families of prisoners, a list of books for children, a set of pamphlets especially for incarcerated fathers, topical reading and references, and a selected video list.

Family and Corrections Network will continually add to the Children of Prisoners Library as opportunities allow. We are now seeking support to add materials especially for educators, faith communities, legal practitioners and mental health practitioners. We also want to provide reading materials for children of prisoners and a forum for their stories. To be notified when new material is added to CPL, join the FCN E-mail list at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org).

### **Reference**

Fishman, Susan F. and Alissi, Albert S., "Strengthening Families as Natural Support Systems for Offenders," *Federal Probation*, September 1979.

## **In the Library**

### **Facts and Issues**

- 101: Introduction to Children of Prisoners
- 102: Why Maintain Relationships?
- 103: Conversations - Questions Children Ask
- 104: Risk and Protection
- 105: Visiting Mom or Dad
- 106: Jail and Prison Procedures
- 107: Communication Tips for Families

### **Materials For Caregivers**

- 201: Caring for Children of Prisoners
- 202: Questions from Caregivers
- 203: What Do Children of Prisoners Need?
- 204: Tips from Caregivers for Caregivers

### **Materials for Health Care Providers**

- 301: Impact of Parental Incarceration
- 302: Challenges for Health Care Providers
- 303: Common Stress Points
- 304: Different Children/ Different Behaviors
- 305: Strategies for Intervention
- 306: Tips for Fostering Trust & Safety
- 307: The Caregiver's Situation

### **Resource Section**

901: Resources: Agencies, Book List, Glossary, Incarcerated Fathers Library, Links, Reading & References, Videos

## **About CPL'S Author and Publisher**

### **Ann Adalist-Estrin**

Ann is a Child and Family Therapist at BRIDGES: Parent-Child Counseling and Consultation Services in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. She operates Incarcerated Parents and their Children Consulting Services and is a trainer for the Healthy Steps For Young Children Project at Boston University School of Medicine.

Ann is an author, speaker and consultant to a wide variety of agencies serving children and families in the U.S. and Canada. She has served on the faculties of Temple University, The University of Arts, and Community College of Philadelphia. She currently teaches a seminar for child care center directors at Holy Family College in Philadelphia and a graduate course for teachers entitled "Those Left Behind: Addressing the needs of children of prisoners" for Bob Randall Associates at Gratz College, Philadelphia.

She serves on the Board of Directors of Family and Corrections Network.

With Jim Mustin, Ann co-authored *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide*. She authored the Children of Prisoners Library.

### **Jim Mustin**

Jim is the executive director and founder of Family and Corrections Network (FCN). At FCN, he publishes FCN REPORT, the only national publication on working with families of offenders and manages the FCN web site, [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org), which has over 150,000 visitors a year. Under Jim's leadership, FCN has produced five national conferences on families of offenders.

Jim co-managed two North American Conference on Fathers Behind Bars and on the Streets with the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families. In 1995, Jim took early retirement from the Virginia Department of Corrections. He lives with his wife, Ellen, in Palmyra, Virginia.

With Ann Adalist-Estrin, Jim co-authored *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide*. Jim edited and published the Children of Prisoners Library.

***Why Maintain Relationships? CPL 102***  
<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL102-WhyMaintain.html>

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Is prison visiting good for the child of a prisoner? Is it good for the parent in prison? Is it good for the family?

Parents in prison can contribute positively to a child's upbringing. Prison can be an opportunity to become a better parent—more caring, concerned and informed.

There is no one right answer for every situation or family. But there are many families and children that can benefit from maintaining family ties through the crises of incarceration.

**Can contact with a parent in prison benefit children?**

Each family situation is different. The potential benefit to children depends greatly on how much support they receive. There are many adults who are important in the lives of children of prisoners. Children can benefit when adults help with letter writing and phone calls. They can also benefit when these adults participate in preparing for and conducting visits.

There are several ways children can benefit from visits to their parents in prison.

**Potential Benefits to Children**

- **Correcting frightening images**  
What the child imagines about the incarcerated parent's condition and circumstances is likely to be much worse and more frightening than the reality. As depressing as a prison visiting room may be, it is far better than what many children imagine.
- **Talking face to face**  
Parents in prison can talk with their children about their crime and life behind bars in ways that can decrease the child's guilt and feelings of responsibility. Parents in prison can help their children feel worthy and lovable.
- **Learning you are not alone**  
Seeing other children and families at prison visits helps families know their situation is not unique. There are people who understand.
- **Preparing for release**  
Maintaining contact through visits, phone and mail is also important to prepare the incarcerated parent to be re-united with the family upon release. Without contact, the child may experience the parent's return as an intrusion. The child may be confused when the newly released parent brings a change in parenting style and rules to an established routine in the family. This can be true whether or not the parent will live with the child.
- **Preparing for release**  
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- **Preventing termination of parental rights**  
For children placed in foster care because of parental incarceration, visits are important to avoid permanent placement. These visits assure children that their parents have not voluntarily abandoned them to strangers. In the lives of foster children, ongoing visiting creates continuity. Also,

courts may be less inclined to terminate the rights of a parent who, while incarcerated, worked to provide parental support.

- **Healing grief and loss**

The pain of separation can overwhelm children in foster care and other children of prisoners. Maintaining the relationship between the child and the parent in prison is important to the child's adjustment and healing.

### **Can contact with family members behind bars benefit families?**

Families can benefit from bridging the gap between jail and community. Families are complex systems. The absence of a part of the system has a powerful impact on its functioning. Family members in prison can be a vibrant part of the family if communication exists.

While prison limits the activities that a family member can perform, a prisoner can still fill an important role in family life as mother, father, spouse, partner, or sibling.

But families can only benefit from their relationship with an incarcerated member when and if they stay in communication.

There are many reasons for families separated by arrest and imprisonment to keep in touch. There are also many reasons that doing so is difficult.

Children of Prisoners Library pamphlets are designed to make the process a little easier. For more ideas on maintaining relationships, see CPL pamphlets 103, 105 and 107 and 201 – 204.

### **Can contact with families benefit prisoners?**

The family is probably this country's most valuable weapon in fighting crime. Prisoners who receive visitors, maintain family ties, and are released to a stable home environment are more likely to succeed in leading productive, crime-free lives.

Prison inmates clearly benefit from family efforts to stay in touch. Families can provide an incentive for prisoners to grow, learn and change. Families can help prisoners stay in touch with what's going on in the world, easing their transition back to society. Some parole authorities see strong family ties as an indicator that a prisoner is better prepared for release.

Many parents in prison can contribute positively to a child's upbringing. Prisoners who have failed as citizens can succeed as parents. Prison can be an opportunity to become a better parent—more caring, concerned and informed.

Prison may not be the best place to improve one's parenting, but it has been done. Around the country, there is growing interest in starting and expanding programs to help prisoners learn the skills of parenting. The Directory of Programs at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org) lists many examples.

### ***Conversations: Questions Children Ask CPL 103***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL103-Conversations.html>

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

A child needs contact with the parent in prison for the relationship to continue in a meaningful way. It also helps the child adjust to and heal from the separation. A child may have contact with an incarcerated mother or father by personal visits, letters, or phone calls. But the value of that contact often depends on the quality of the interactions and the content of the conversations.

Collect calls from prison are expensive and need to be kept short. Children are often not included in calls except for a fast greeting. Sometimes the children have so little to say that it seems that the conversation is meaningless. Yet, hearing the parent's voice, even for a short time, may be more reassuring than it seems. Mail from a parent in prison is important to children. A post card, acknowledging an accomplishment or remembering a birthday or holiday, means a lot to all children. Children of prisoners have little else to connect them to their parents, so mail from them is especially treasured.

But children of prisoners need more than just contact from their parents and other adults. They need help coming to terms with what has happened. Children need a safe place to express their fears and feelings, and find answers to their questions.

**There are 4 main questions that children ask or want to ask their incarcerated parents:**

- Where are you?
- Why are you there?
- When are you coming home?
- Are you okay?

**There are also 2 questions in the hearts and minds of prisoners' children that they rarely ask. These questions are often "behind the scenes" in their conversations**

- Do you blame me?
- Do you love me?

These questions can come in many forms. Some children ask them directly with straightforward language. Other children beat around the bush. Some act out their questions by getting into trouble or by confronting adults with challenging or aggressive behaviors.

### **The Answers Parents Give**

Incarcerated parents, their children's caregivers and other interested adults should prepare to answer these questions. Sometimes parents are uncomfortable having these conversations. More often they are just not sure how to answer children's questions in ways that children will understand.

Another issue is, who will answer the questions? An incarcerated parent who is active in the child's life will want to be the one to answer most of these questions. Children typically ask about the experiences of the prisoner parent. These questions should be answered by that parent whenever possible. Sometimes, though, the job of answering these questions belongs only to the caregiver or other parent. In either case, children seem to respond best when their questions are answered simply and honestly.

This pamphlet was written to help parents in prison and the caregivers of their children as they try to answer children's questions. As painful as these conversations may be, parents and children will weather the separation best when children better understand the situation.

### **Where are you?**

Children's caretakers often try to protect children by avoiding the truth about the whereabouts of their incarcerated parent. There are several stories often used by parents and family members to answer the question "Where is Mom or Dad?" or "Where are you?"

### ***Away at School***

Sometimes children are told the parent in prison is "away at school." This lie rarely succeeds with school aged children who are old enough to understand that people (even college students) come home from school sometimes. Children of prisoners may already have difficulty in school. It doesn't help to associate school with the pain of what feels like permanent separation from parents. It might even lead to, or exaggerate a dislike of going to school or doing school work.

### ***Working far away***

Sometimes children are told the parent in prison is "working far away." This may satisfy children at first, especially if there is not increased financial stress. But it is hard for children to understand why money is

tighter if the parent went away to work. Why aren't they sending home money? Children could assume that a parent doesn't want to see them or they would come home on their days off.

### ***In the military***

Sometimes children are told the parent in prison is "in the military." This can give children a way to explain their parent's absence to their friends, especially if the parent's sentence is short. But in times of world conflict it usually leaves children afraid of war and danger. This can increase their worry and fear.

### ***In the hospital***

Sometimes children are told the parent in prison is "in the hospital." This can raise children's fear of doctors and hospitals, and increase anxiety over the health of the parent. When parents do not return home within a few days, many children imagine that the parent has died and that no one is telling them the truth.

Regardless of the story, these lies become exposed to the child sooner or later, usually sooner if the child is visiting the parent in prison. As children read, watch TV, and listen to people talk, they quickly learn what a prison is and how it differs from work, school or the military. Then the fact that the prison is not a school, hospital or military base becomes clear to them.

Even if children do not see the prison, they are likely to overhear a conversation that will reveal the truth. Most mail from prisoners is clearly marked as originating in a correctional facility, so the child (as well as the mailman and nosy neighbors) figures it out. If the prisoner calls home, the collect call operator usually says the call is from a prison.

Once children realize the truth, they feel lied to. They begin to develop distrust that hurts their relationships, especially with the person who made up the story. Lying to the child is often intended to minimize feelings of shame and stigma associated with parental incarceration. But it increases these feelings by creating a family secret. A family secret is a big burden for a small child.

Even when families tell children a parent is in prison, they often encourage the children not to tell others. This is not necessarily bad advice, since children can be cruel. Other children may tease, isolate, or humiliate the child. Sadly, even school officials and parents of children's friends cannot be counted on to provide support to children of prisoners. The child who has no one to share concerns with can pay a high emotional price for keeping a secret.

Parents and caregivers usually need to weigh three choices: tell the truth and let it be out in the open, tell the truth and ask children to keep it quiet, or make up a story. Parents and caregivers then have to judge the dangers of each option to the child's emotional health.

When the child knows the truth of **where** the parent is, they usually next ask **why**.

### **Why are you here?**

Children need the truth, and in most cases they should get it, either before or at a visit. They are looking for a way to make sense out of what has happened. They become nervous and anxious if the answers they get do not make sense to them.

### **Keep in Mind**

- Children understand the idea of being punished for breaking rules.
- Young children need simple descriptions of the offense. "Dad hurt someone," or "Mom stole something," or "I took drugs," or "I sold drugs that are not allowed."
- Older children will have more questions and may need more detail.
- Truth is easier on kids than what they imagine.

Most children hear things about the crime either on the street or within the house or family. This knowledge will confuse them tremendously if they have not been told the truth.

Occasionally, prisoner parents are innocent. For them and for their families, the frustration, and rage at the injustice of the system and the world is very real and can create tremendous hopelessness and despair. A prisoner may be guilty of a crime, but sentenced to time that is excessive. Many people wait months in jail before trial because they cannot afford bail.

An incarcerated parent may want to steadfastly maintain innocence, or believe the sentence is unfair, or consider bail excessive. These things need to be talked about without undermining a child's respect for appropriate and lawful authority or triggering fear and distrust. When the focus is not so much on whether the incarcerated parent's circumstances are "fair," but on how the child's parents, counselors and teachers deal with unfairness, children can learn positive ways to advocate justice and fight discrimination and racism. Acknowledge that the incarcerated parent did something wrong and also that the criminal justice system unconsciously or unfairly added an extra penalty because the offender was African-American or Latino. Minority adolescents may need to know they are at greater risk of arrest, detention and incarceration and to be prepared for that possibility.

Often when one parent is incarcerated, children become overly concerned about and attached to the other parent or primary caretaker. They fear that s/he too will be taken away. Talk of how unjust the system is may increase the child's fear that the remaining parent may be taken away next.

Many prisoners, who are guilty as charged, struggle with the fear of being rejected if their loved ones knew the truth. They say they are innocent to keep their families.

Many children are extremely angry. They feel abandoned by parents who risked incarceration by their conflict with the law. In most cases, the incarcerated parent simply needs to apologize to the child for the upset and upheaval that s/he has caused. They need to ask the child to forgive and to be a partner in rebuilding their lives.

It takes courage to have these conversations. It means risking anger and rejection. It means admitting causing pain to those you love. The child's caregiver, and other adults in the child's life, can help by supporting the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent. This support helps build the honesty that is required for parents and children to sustain their family bonds through this crisis.

The parent in prison, the child's caregiver, and outside parties such as social workers may disagree about what to say about the arrest and incarceration. This can be hard to resolve. If the incarcerated parent is concerned about how the information about her/him is to be presented, it may be best if s/he is given the opportunity to share it directly. Hopefully, s/he can be persuaded that the child is going to learn the truth eventually, and hearing it directly from the incarcerated parent is the best way to hear it.

For more information on this topic, see: *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System* by David Cole. The New Press, New York, 1999 and *Raising Black Children* by Comer, J. and Poussaint, A.. Plume, NY 1992.

### **When are you coming home?**

Throughout the entire process from arrest to release, there is often tremendous uncertainty about when a prisoner will come home.

Most people know the range of possible outcomes: the maximum sentence one could receive if found guilty as charged, the sentence available if the defendant accepts the plea bargain offered, or the chance that the case will be dismissed altogether. For some, denial is so great that they never seem to consider the possibility of a prison or jail sentence. Their instinct is to reassure their children that they will be out soon. When children seem distressed about a parent's incarceration, and beg their parents to come home, parents naturally want to offer relief. They often say "soon" or "It won't be long now." A child expecting a parent to come home from prison is devastated when the parent fails to arrive.



Children handle all this uncertainty best when they have honest answers - even when that means saying "I really don't know." Young children do best when they measure time in seasons or holidays. "It looks like Mommy will be home after 3 summers or 5 birthdays." Longer sentences sound long no matter what adults say to soften it. "Dad will probably get out when you are 18" is truly a lifetime to a 6 year old. Children are very concrete, though. The truth is easier for them to grasp than vague answers like "It will be a long time."

***When talking about when a parent is coming home, remember to consider where "home" is going to be.***

There are children whose parents will be released from jail or prison, but will not be living with the child. Sometimes, when the parent wasn't living with the child before the arrest, it is clearly understood that s/he won't be living with the child after release. But the arrest or incarceration of a parent often impacts not only on the child's custody but also on the parent's relationship to a spouse/lover. The free world parent may find someone new while the partner is in prison. Children may imagine longed for reunions or family living situations. The harmfulness of these fantasies can be reduced when parents are honest about their plans.

### **Are you okay?**

Mostly, the child wants to be reassured that the incarcerated parent is safe, secure, and able to manage the difficult circumstances. Children are very sensitive to their environments. Many children travel home from prison visits in silence or in tears because they are deeply distressed over separating from the parent. They also feel they are abandoning their beloved parent to a dreadful place.

Some parents would like to assure the child that they are safe and happy, but unfortunately, they cannot. Prison is not an OK place to be. It is not necessary to tell children the horrors of incarceration to teach them that imprisonment is a punishment. It will only worry them.

Answers to the question "Are you OK?" such as "I am not OK in here but I can certainly handle it. Or "I am OK in some ways. I have a bed and food and books to read. But I am not OK because prison is not a good place to be. And most of all I can't be with you." These kinds of answers balance the truth with some reassurance that the parent misses the child and is not in severe danger.

### **Do you love me? Do you blame me?**

These are not questions that children ask directly. Yet the purpose of much of the communication discussed throughout this pamphlet is directed to answering these questions: "Do you love me?" and "Do you blame me?" The goal is to insure that the child does in fact feel loved by the incarcerated parent and others, and does not feel responsible in any way for the terrible circumstances in which the family finds itself.

Children often blame themselves for their parent's mistakes. A child who pressured parents for an expensive gift may think that the parent's subsequent arrest for selling drugs was related to an effort to get the desired object. Similarly, a child who has been angry at the parent may believe the subsequent arrest was somehow caused by their negative thoughts about the parent.

Parents generally see little connection between their criminal activity and their children, and certainly do not commit a crime for the purpose of abandoning their families. But children often interpret the parent's behavior solely in connection to themselves." If you cared about me you wouldn't have gone to jail (left me)."

Parents should be unwavering in their assurances that the child is loved unconditionally. That the child did nothing to cause the incarceration.

The issues raised by these questions and conversations are complex and emotional. Children of prisoners, their parents and caregivers all need support from those around them. Many of the pamphlets in the Children of Prisoners Library can assist caregivers, professionals and community members in this process.

## ***Risk and Protection CPL 104***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL104-RiskandProtection.html>

*Adapted from **Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide** by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin CPL 104

Children and families of prisoners often share common characteristics and life circumstances. Many are poor. Some live in suburban and rural communities, but most live in inner-city neighborhoods. Most are likely to experience addictions and domestic or community violence. Within that profile, however, there are many variations and a continuum of risk.

At one end of the continuum, there are families in grave danger. On the other are those with adequate support systems that are coping fairly well. In between are large numbers of children and families that are barely managing and are under great pressures.

### **Assessing Risk Factors for Children and Families of Prisoners**

Research has helped us to understand the continuum of risk and has identified behaviors and characteristics that put children and families at risk. The incarceration of a parent may be, in and of itself, a risk factor, but most members of the families of prisoners experience multiple risks. They often endure poverty, substandard educational environments, violent neighborhoods, inadequate parenting or care and various forms of institutional and interpersonal racism. Studies show that the accumulation of these risks creates cycles of failure.

These failures can lead to poor work and school performance and cause a loss of self-respect. Children and families of prisoners express feelings of hopelessness, loss and defeat and/or rage and resentment. They may be more vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse as they seek connections and test boundaries. The pursuit of numbness (via drugs and alcohol) that follows in the wake of trauma and hopelessness can lead to the criminal behaviors that chemical dependence requires and unresolved rage breeds.

Some families find protection from the most damaging aspects of risk. Others do not. As communities work to provide protection and to meet the needs of these families, individual strengths and varying realities must be respected.

Some incarcerated parents were caring and involved prior to imprisonment. Some were uninvolved and disconnected before and continue that pattern inside. Some begin to build a relationship with their children only when they are locked up. Others appear involved while incarcerated, but have great difficulty maintaining their relationships on the street. Some men and women may distance themselves from their families when they go to jail. They often do so as a protective coping strategy, not from a lack of interest or caring.

Each inmate, parolee, child and family member will cope with incarceration in their own way. Prisoners and their families remind us that each family is unique and that many factors influence a family's ability to cope with the incarceration and release of a family member.

### **What Puts Families At Additional Risk?**

The following risk factors, when added to parental incarceration, increase stress and negative impact for children of prisoners.

- Abuse: physical, sexual, emotional.
- Poverty and/or parental unemployment or under-employment.
- Racism.
- Substandard schooling/education for parent and/or child.
- Alcoholism (child's or parent's).

- Drug abuse/addiction (child's or parent's).
- Deteriorating or uninhabitable housing.
- Gang involvement.
- Crime-victimization.
- Criminal activity (child's or parent's).
- Incarceration of parent or caregiver.
- Trauma...violence, abuse, terrorism or other life threatening circumstances.
- Parental neglect.
- Parental harshness.
- Low birth weight.
- Poor nutrition.
- Inferior medical care.
- Mental illness of child or parent.
- Physically or emotionally unavailable parents.
- Marital distress (parents).
- Family divorce.
- Single parenthood (parent's or teen's).
- Lack of social support (kid's or parent's).
- Lack of role models (kid's or parent's).
- Deprivation of social relationships and/or activities.
- Profound or repeated loss.
- Powerlessness-personal, family and community.

### **Factors Affecting Family Coping**

- Community support vs. isolation: urban, suburban or rural.
- Economic stability.
- Health and emotional capacity of caregivers.
- Quality of the child's school.
- Job satisfaction (teen's and adult's).
- Community resources.
- Child and family spirituality.
- Racial and ethnic prejudices.

### **What Protects Children and Families**

Protective factors are people and things that buffer children and families from risk. They increase the capacity for survival and can foster healthy development in spite of the risks. Research on resiliency tells us that for children exposed to multiple risks, three factors stand out in those who develop successfully:

- Predictable and attached relationships with one or more caring adults.
- Skills and activities that build competence and confidence.
- Belief in a higher power, spirituality and/or affiliation with a community of faith.

People and programs can make a difference in the lives of children and families of prisoners. They can function as protective factors. People who make a difference are resourceful in the face of difficulty, able to emotionally recover from setbacks and see themselves as capable of making a difference in others' lives. Programs that help are relevant to the needs and lives of the families they serve, partner with family members to find solutions to problems and support children and families without judging or criticizing the family member in prison.

For more about how communities can help, see *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide* by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, Family and Corrections Network, publisher.

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

The decision of whether or not to take children to visit parents in jail or prison is a hard one. It depends on finances, prison policy, transportation, distance and the preference of the parent behind bars. Studies do show that most children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit their parents. Usually, it takes time for them to cope with the feelings that the visits raise, though. While not visiting is sometimes easier on the emotions in the short run, out of sight is not out of mind.

Distance leaves a lot of confusion, questions, imagined dangers and fears for kids to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors at home, school or both and can be harmful to the child over time.

Children depend on their adult caregivers to make the experience of visiting parents in prison as stress free as possible.

### **Know the Rules**

Knowing visiting rules and regulations, including where to go and what to bring, is an important part of the adult's preparation for a prison visit. These preparations can make the visit and the post visit reaction easier for the child.

Children need preparation as well. First, it is important to share with the child as much as is appropriate, according to the child's age, about what the visit will be like. Tell the child: how long the ride is, if correctional officers will be in uniforms, what the inmate parent will be wearing, details about the search process for getting in and guidelines for going to the bathroom and using vending machines.

Some of this information can best be obtained from prisoner parents. Prisoners can tell caregivers what they will be wearing, and if there are any changes in their physical appearance since the last time the child saw them.

Some information can be obtained from the prison, especially about visiting hours and what you can take in. Caregivers may also tell children how they will go to the prison, how long the trip will take and if there is money for snacks. When the experience matches children's expectations, they will be less anxious.

### **Know the Child**

How long can the child sit? Are there choices of time of day to go? How long in advance do they need to begin to discuss the visit? Some children (those with slow-to-warm-up temperaments) take a long time to adapt and adjust to people, places, and ideas or plans. They need days or weeks of talking about the visit to be ready. Other children with very persistent and non-distractible temperaments may become too anxious if the preparations begin too far in advance. Discussing the visit only a day or two ahead of time may work better for them.

Incarcerated parents can also help. They can write to their child telling them all about what the visits will be like. They can be in touch with caregivers in advance to be filled in on the child's daily life and make lists of things to talk about in the visit.

### **Plan to Talk**

What to talk about in the visit is often a real challenge for the children and their parents and caregivers. Children are afraid if they tell their parent about life on the outside, it will make them sad. Parents may be worried that if they talk about life inside, the children will be scared or bored. But, it is OK to talk about every day life. That is what children and parents are missing and needing.

Caregivers also need to know how to talk to children after visits. Ask them about what they remembered or liked best about the visit and also about what they didn't like or what was hard to say. This will let them know that it is OK to talk about their parents. It will also prepare them for the next visit.

Some caregivers may have trouble separating their feelings about the prisoner and the crime from the child's feelings. When this happens, children have trouble expressing their own feelings—from fear of upsetting the caregiver. In some cases, it becomes necessary to seek professional guidance and counseling.

### Have Realistic Expectations

The charts on the following pages give guidelines on how to prepare children of different ages for visits:

#### [Infants: 0-6 Months](#)

<b>Infants: 0-6 Months</b>	<b>Babies Like To:</b>	<b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b>	<b>During Visits Inmate Parents Can:</b>
	<p>Be held a lot!</p> <p>Look at things, especially faces. Reach and bat and grab.</p> <p>Put things in their mouths.</p> <p>Some need their fingers and thumbs to calm themselves.</p> <p>"Respond" to familiar voices and faces</p> <p>React to new sounds</p> <p>Use their sense of smell to differentiate between people</p> <p>Cry to communicate</p>	<p>Let baby hear a tape of parent's voice (videos are great, too).</p> <p>Wash baby's sheets and clothes in the soap or body wash used by the parent</p> <p>Communicate with the incarcerated parent about the child's new and emerging skills, what her noises mean as she learns to talk and how he is standing, crawling or rolling over. This may make the inmate parent sad but will help maintain the attachment and could minimize distress at visits.</p>	<p>Know that holding your baby won't spoil him or her.</p> <p>Position baby so he/she can see you — change position if he/she gets bored.</p> <p>Allow baby to touch your face and explore you.</p> <p>Gently unfold fingers when they grab your hair, etc.</p> <p>Talk to baby a lot!</p> <p>Change the tone in your voice. Sing. Imitate baby's sounds.</p> <p>Understand that babies cry because they need or want something.</p> <p>Let baby's caregiver help you to "read" baby's signals. They may be changing rapidly and you will need help knowing what the changes have been.</p>

Older Babies: 7-13 Months

<p><b>Older Babies: 7-13 Months</b></p>	<p><b>Babies Like To:</b></p> <p>Sit alone.</p> <p>Crawl and move.</p> <p>Pick up tiny objects. Practice banging and shaking and dropping things.</p> <p>Go to someone they know when "strangers" are around.</p> <p>Babble and shriek.</p> <p>Show understanding of simple commands (wave bye-bye).</p> <p>Practice getting the caregiver to come to them and take care of their needs by calling, crying or shrieking and then stopping when held or attended to.</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Allow baby lots of time unencumbered by seats and straps. If they will need to be restrained during the visit, let them be out of car seat, walker or stroller and roll around on the floor or grass or blanket for a while before the visit.</p> <p>Talk to baby both in "baby talk" and using adult words. Babbling back in the baby's language promotes language development as long as adults also use real words to communicate to baby.</p> <p>Be careful not to pressure baby to perform for you or others if he/she is resisting, even though you may want them to practice all the new things they can do to show Mom or Dad at the visit.</p>	<p><b>During Visits Inmate Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Let baby crawl or sit alone or play "active" games (patty cake, bend and stretch.)</p> <p>Give baby age appropriate finger foods if allowed. Be very careful with vending machine snacks that can cause choking such as popcorn, peanuts and small candy items.</p> <p>Be patient – if baby reacts as if you are a stranger, keep close... but don't push. Baby will probably warm up to you after several visits.</p> <p>Some babies may have the opposite reaction and cling to you. In this case, saying goodbye can mean that caregivers may have to pull or pry baby away from Mom or Dad. This is painful for everyone.</p> <p>In most cases, quick goodbyes are best. Never trick baby (or any age child) or sneak away. This will cause the child not to trust you next time.</p>
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Toddlers: 14-30 Months

<p><b>Toddlers: 14-30 Months</b></p>	<p><b>Toddlers Like to:</b></p> <p>Refine their motor skills by walking/running/ climbing.</p> <p>Scribble</p> <p>Explore everything!</p> <p>Imitate adults</p> <p>Label objects using newly learned words.</p> <p>Tell adults what they need and want.</p> <p>Test the rules to see if they are real.</p> <p>Hold a picture of Mom or Dad in their mind when they are not with them.</p> <p>Do some things for themselves.</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Be sure toddler is rested and fed...this is a most difficult age for visits if there is no play area.</p> <p>Do not bombard toddler with rules ahead of time... toddler will either not remember or test them anyway.</p> <p>Show toddler lots of pictures of the incarcerated parent.</p> <p>If possible make arrangements ahead of time so that you can be prepared to cut visits short if toddler cannot follow the rules.</p>	<p><b>During Visits Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Play word games...label objects, make silly noises, etc. ask where's your nose etc.</p> <p>Walk around if allowed. Label objects, colors and people for your child.</p> <p>Give toddler choices whenever possible...even little ones...do you want to sit here or here? Do you want one kiss or two?</p> <p>Give clear rules/limits with consequences but try to tell toddler what they can do, not what they are not supposed to do. "Walk, Junior. If you run you will have to sit on Mom-Mom's lap" is better than "Stop running."</p> <p>Toddlers are really frustrating, even to free world parents. It is especially hard when you want the visit to be perfect. Be patient but firm. Toddlers need both from parents and giving them both understanding and discipline is good parenting!</p> <p>Prepare yourself emotionally for the possibility of needing to cut the visit short if toddler cannot sit still or follow the rules. As unfair as it is to you to miss out on time with them, it is also unfair to be angry with a toddler for not being able to meet unrealistic expectations. Show pride in toddler's accomplishments while accepting that many emotional needs are still similar to a baby's.</p>
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Pre-Schoolers: 2 1/2- 4 Year Olds

<p><b>Pre-Schoolers:</b> <b>2 1/2-4 year olds</b></p>	<p><b>Children Will:</b></p> <p>Practice lots of skills like fine motor skills (drawing, digging, etc.).</p> <p>Begin to express anger in words. ("You're not my friend." "I hate you.")</p> <p>Point out discrepancies in familiar events.</p> <p>Insist on being the center of attention and interrupt adult conversations.</p> <p>Enjoy being read to. Wonder about the incarcerated parents' daily life: when and where they sleep, eat, go to the bathroom, etc.</p> <p>Practice their emotional separateness by being oppositional and defiant.</p> <p>Ask many questions.</p>	<p><b>Before the Visit Caregivers Can:</b></p> <p>Read children letters from parents.</p> <p>Send drawings to parents.</p> <p>Give autonomy, power and choices when appropriate so child can accept not having power or choice when grownups are in control.</p> <p>Be clear about whether or not the child does have a choice. Habits that adults have in using words can be very confusing to children:</p> <p>When adults ask, "Are you ready to go?" or "Can you give dad a hug?" or "Let's go now, ok?," children get the idea that they have a choice.</p> <p>If you are willing to accept, "No, I don't want to" or "I am not ready" as a response from the child, then your questions are OK</p> <p>If you really mean to say "We are going now, this is not a choice," then say that</p>	<p><b>During Visits Parents Can:</b></p> <p>Accept angry feelings and set limits on aggressive behavior. "You look like you are mad at me and you don't like me being here do you?" is a way of letting children know that you get it that they are upset</p> <p>"Even though you are very angry, you are not allowed to hit me, if you hit me again you may have to leave and see me next time." is a way of enforcing rules even though you will not want them to leave.</p> <p>Be careful not to say that you will leave as a consequence. And remember, the anger isn't bad, the child isn't bad...just the hitting is bad.</p> <p>Sing songs together.</p> <p>Play classification word games (all things that are fruit...).</p> <p>Understand that it is hard for pre-schoolers to be "quiet."</p> <p>Draw pictures with your child or talk about pictures they have sent you.</p> <p>Give many choices and accept pre-schoolers' tastes and preferences even when they are choices made only to be opposite from you.</p> <p>Answer children's questions as best you can. Don't be afraid to talk about your daily life.</p>
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School Age: 6-12 Year Olds

<p><b>School Age:</b> <b>6-12 years old</b></p>	<p><b>Children Will:</b></p> <p>Need to be accepted by their peers.</p> <p>Play sports and games.</p> <p>Collect things.</p> <p>Want to talk about their life but worry that they will make the incarcerated parent feel bad if they talk about the outside.</p> <p>Hold back emotions so that the visit will go well.</p> <p>Sometimes refuse to visit...out of anger, hurt or fear. Or sometimes just because they would rather play basketball or hang out with their friends.</p>	<p><b>Grown-ups Can:</b></p> <p>Remember and accept that children may be embarrassed by the parents' incarceration and crime.</p> <p>Play games with them.</p> <p>Ask about their hobbies, sports, collections.</p> <p>Listen to their stories without asking too many questions or giving advice. Just listen.</p> <p>Tell them it helps you to feel good when they talk about their lives.</p> <p>Look for signs of sadness, disappointment, upset and anger and let children know you accept those feelings and want to talk about it.</p> <p>Answer questions as honestly as possible.</p> <p>Talk to them about your life on the inside. Tell them things they can relate to like TV shows you watch, books you read and classes you take.</p>
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## A Child's First Visit

- If the facility is geographically near, and several visits will be possible within a short time after the initial incarceration, it is probably best if the adult (custodial parent, foster parent, social worker) visits alone the first time. In that way, s/he will be able to describe the facility to the child, assure the child of the parent's health and safety, and prepare better for the visit.
- It is important to take time to talk to the incarcerated parent about the importance of focusing her/his attention on the child. Give the prisoner parent ideas for things to talk about related to the child's interests and feelings.
- This pamphlet and others in the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL) can help prisoners prepare for visits. Since most prisoners do not have access to the Internet, friends and family can help by mailing CPL materials to them.
- If it is not possible to make a "pre-visit", try to ask the inmate about the facility and the visiting rules, or speak to someone who has visited the institution, and get as much information as you can about the entry process. How long is the wait? What does the visiting room look like? What is available to eat? If you don't know anyone, call the facility.
- Since many visiting rooms have nothing to help you amuse a child, try to think of imaginative ways to keep the child engaged while waiting and while visiting. For ideas, see CPL 107, Communication Tips. CPL 103: Conversations - Questions Children Ask, can also be helpful.

## Two Final Thoughts

The known is always easier than the imagined...when possible, be truthful.

It is usually easier to leave than to be left. If possible let children leave the visit before the parent returns to their unit or cell.

### ***Jail and Prison Procedures CPL 106 Information For Families***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL106-JailandPrison.html>

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

By Jim Mustin and Ann Adalist-Estrin

Families need information to stay connected with their loved ones in prison. Families need to know how prisons and jails (correctional facilities) work. Understanding the rules governing contact between prisoners and the family is essential. This information may be available to those familiar with the criminal justice system. It is rarely available to family members or foster parents.

Health care providers as well as social workers, child care workers, youth service agencies, counselors and teachers can help. They can use the Children of Prisoners Library to learn more about the issues. They can give this and other Children of Prisoner Library pamphlets to families and colleagues. This pamphlet outlines some of the policies and procedures of prisons and jails that affect children and families of prisoners.

## Jails

In most states, the term *jail* refers to local (county or city) facilities housing people awaiting trial, serving short sentences or awaiting transfer to a prison. Jails usually hold inmates (or prisoners) who have been sentenced to three years or less. Jails may also hold former prisoners accused of violating parole. Jails are generally located closer to homes of inmates than prisons.



## **Prisons**

Prisons are state or federal facilities that house people convicted of felonies who are serving longer sentences. State prisons are operated by state departments of correctional services or agencies with similar names. Prisons are typically located far from the cities and communities where the prisoners and their families live.

Prisons may not have been built far away with an anti-family purpose, but distance does discourage family contact.

## **Classification**

Prisons are classified by the levels of security needed to maintain control. Generally, the levels of security used are *maximum*, *medium* and *minimum*.

The type of facility and its classification can influence the following rules and procedures.

## **Communicating with Prisoners**

For many families, the only communication with an incarcerated loved one is through the mail or by telephone. Phone calls may be monitored. Letters may be examined for contraband or evidence of wrongdoing.

*Contraband* are items prisoners are not permitted to have. The list of contraband items will vary from facility to facility.

## **Mail**

In most cases, anyone can write to a prisoner. If the envelope is correctly addressed with name, inmate identification number and facility address, it generally reaches its destination. But if the prisoner is no longer there, delivery is delayed.

In many state prison systems, inmates are transferred frequently— especially newly sentenced prisoners. An inmate entering state custody may be moved several times within the first 6 months. Prisoners in federal custody may also be transferred often. Federal prisoners can be taken to any federal facility in any state. While in transit they will likely be held temporarily in local jails along the way.

States with more prisoners than prison space may send some prisoners away to other states or to privately run prisons. Families are not always notified of transfers until days or weeks after the move. Children and their caregivers can spend days not knowing where their loved ones are.

Families of prisoners often move after a parent's arrest or incarceration. They may be evicted because of the incarcerated parent's arrest or because of worsening financial status. In some cases the apartment might be seized by the government under federal drug laws. All this can make it difficult for the inmate to contact the family.

## **Contraband**

As noted earlier, there are rules covering what an inmate may receive in the mail. Letters, cards, and photos are usually acceptable, but many things are not. Drugs and weapons are obviously prohibited. But some other items—newspaper clippings, magazines, books, maps may also be disallowed.

These rules can frustrate children who want to send gifts to their parents. Children make beautiful clay coil pots, key chains, and birdhouses in their art and shop classes. They are disappointed when their incarcerated parents aren't allowed to have these items. Unfortunately, many things children want to send may be returned or destroyed because they are not permitted in a jail or prison.

Rules on sending money and packages to prisoners vary from state to state and institution to institution. Check the rules before sending packages.

## **Packages**

There are usually strict rules regarding packages. Family members should not purchase something for the inmate until it is known that it will be permitted. Guidelines may be requested when visiting the inmate, or can be mailed by the facility or the inmate.

## **Money**

Most facilities have ways for visitors to send or leave money for inmates. Usually, this money is placed in the inmate's *account*, allowing him or her to buy snacks and toiletries at an inmate commissary. It's a good idea to use a money order to send money by mail for deposit in the inmate's account. If the inmate has not sent you rules about packages and money, ask at the institution.

## **Telephone Calls**

In most cases, prisoners can call home but they must call collect. Prison telephone systems are usually computerized and limit the prisoner to calling only previously approved numbers. Inmates submit names and numbers to be called to staff for approval. There can be a delay of several days before a number is approved and can be called.

Most prisons have special telephone contracts governing long distance collect calls from prisoners. These contracts place the burden of enormous phone bills on the backs of family members while making large profits for the government and the phone company. It is not unusual for a prisoner's family to have monthly long distance bills as high as \$250. For more about these telephone contracts and how to do something about them, see [www.curenational.org/~etc](http://www.curenational.org/~etc).

Family members need a telephone that can accept long distance collect calls. Many families have a restricted phone service which doesn't allow such calls. Some have lost their phone service because of unpaid bills from accepting long distance calls. Social workers or others working with children of prisoners can try to arrange an occasional call to the child through an inmate's counselor or perhaps help by accepting calls or providing emergency funding.

## **Visiting**

Children can be heartbroken and frightened if they travel long distances, only to discover that they won't be able to visit their parent. This may happen because the inmate is no longer at that facility, the visiting hours are over, or for lack of adequate identification.

If possible, put off traveling to a correctional facility until you know the person you want to visit is there. Also, know the visiting times and regulations for that facility. Call the facility to find out as much as possible about visiting rules and procedures. Before calling or visiting, have the correct spelling of the inmate's name, date of birth, and, if possible the inmate identification number.

## **Visiting Lists; Who May Visit**

In most systems, anyone on an inmates approved visitor list can visit. Each visitor must bring a government issued photo ID. There may be regulations about the number of people allowed on a visitors list and how many visitors are allowed in at one time. Usually, children must be accompanied by an adult. Facility rules vary on the age children are required to have a photo ID or may visit without an adult. Unmarried minors, not related to the inmate and not accompanied by a parent or guardian, may need written permission signed by the parent or guardian to be allowed to visit.

Children of inmates can usually visit their incarcerated parents unless there is a court order prohibiting visiting on file with the facility. The following people may not be allowed to visit: ex-prisoners, non-citizens of the U.S., and anyone deemed by prison officials to have caused undue upset to the prisoner or correctional staff.

Most correctional facilities also have rules about the timing of visits. Unlike hospitals, sequenced visits are usually not allowed. (Grandmom and Little Sis can't go in for the first hour while George and Timmy wait, and then switch.) People usually cannot leave a visit and return.

Rules vary in situations and institutions. Prisons rely on inmates to get information to families and caregivers. The high cost of telephone calls from inmates interferes with this process. Family members may need to ask for information ahead of time. For more ideas about visiting with children, see CPL 105: Visiting Mom or Dad.

### **Transportation**

Some county and city jails can be reached by public transportation. State prisons are often located in remote areas. Some can be reached by public transportation, but only with several changes of trains or buses. This travel can be costly. Some facilities can't be reached without a car. Some states have free or low cost bus services to correctional facilities. Ask the inmate, prison staff or see Directory of Programs at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org) for information on what services may be available in your area.

### **Visiting Times**

Visiting only occurs during approved visiting hours. Prisons and jails vary in the number of visits allowed in a week or month. In some cases, inmates are allowed visits only on specific days. Visiting times can include weekend and evening hours. Visits can last only one hour or may be allowed all day. Most institutions have holiday visiting hours.

Arrive early. There can be long waits between arrival at the facility and the actual visit. To verify visiting hours, call the facility, the Department of Correction's information line, or contact a program near you listed in the Directory of Programs at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org).

Before leaving for each visit, remember to confirm that the person you are visiting will be there and the exact times of visits.

Facilities vary in the amount of contact allowed between inmate and visitor. Most state prisons allow visitors to sit together, move around the visiting space and touch each other. The type of touching is monitored by the correctional staff. Many jails do not allow contact. Jail visits are often through glass partitions and phones. Some places, visitors are in the same space but may not touch. Still others can touch (hug) at the beginning and end of visits only.

The *count* is a prison practice that can confound visitors and extend the waiting time. Several times a day, movement stops in the facility and inmates are counted. When the count is "right" or "clear," staff are sure that the right number of inmates are in the facility and no one has escaped. Then movement may resume. If visitors do not arrive before the mid-day count (in most facilities some time between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m.), the inmate cannot be moved to the visiting area until after the count is clear, which might be 45 minutes to two hours later. Inmates already in the visiting room are counted where they are, and need not return to the cell block.

### **Identification**

Identification is important in all jail and prison visits. Have proper identification for every person with you. This will include a driver's license or other photo identification. Some facilities require two pieces of identification, including photo ID. Birth or baptismal certificates are inadequate identification except for minor children.

Children must have identification. For children under 18, a birth certificate is generally accepted. For children accompanied by an adult other than a parent or legal guardian, a letter from the parent along with the birth certificate is necessary.

Social workers or agency officials escorting a child should have a valid driver's license with picture and agency identification. These rules are typical but can vary from state to state.

### **Searches**

Corrections officials want to keep drugs and weapons out of their facilities. They view visitors as a prime source of both drugs and weapons, so visitors are searched.

The first frisk is generally by a walk-through metal detector. If the metal detector rings, the item(s) prompting the alarm must be identified and determined permissible. If the item cannot be identified and publicly removed (for example, the under-wire in a bra), the visitor will be subject to a hand scanner or a pat search. Visitors may request that a person of their own gender conduct the remainder of the frisk. A visitor may decline a pat frisk or a complete frisk and request a non-contact visit, or decline to proceed with the visit.

Visitors may be asked to remove some articles of jewelry or clothing (such as shoes, belts, jackets, watches) before the initial search. To speed up the process, you can travel light. Bring only those items you really need. Avoid clothing and hair styles that involve a lot of metal or that will be disturbed by removing hats, scarves, belts, or pins. Never try to bring drugs or weapons into the facility. Leave questionable items in your car or in the locker provided.

### **Visiting Areas**

Visiting areas vary greatly from facility to facility. Some are large rooms resembling a school cafeteria with tables and chairs. Others look more like a gymnasium. In some, there can be fixed rows of chairs. In others, chairs are clustered in groups of 3-5, depending on how many visitors are allowed for each inmate.

The size of a visiting space may have little relationship to the size of the inmate population or the number of visitors. There may be little privacy due to noise levels, crowding, physical barriers and surveillance by correction officers. Most visiting rooms offer children few or no services or activities.

A few facilities do have specialized programs for inmates and their children operated by outside organizations, community professionals and sometimes trained inmate caregivers. These children's visiting centers can provide a nurturing, child-oriented environment and a wide range of age-appropriate books, games, and activities to help parents and children communicate more naturally.

Some facilities may have outdoor visiting areas with picnic tables and playground equipment—often purchased with inmate funds for the benefit of visiting children. Some prisons may offer special events, including outdoor Family Day Picnics, Christmas parties and even summer camping programs. Inmates usually need a good conduct record and a lower risk classification to attend these events.

Prisoners must also name the family members they wish to invite well in advance so they can be cleared for participation. These events may provide a more comfortable setting for visiting children. A Family Day Picnic may be worth making a special effort to bring children.

In a few states, a more private, extended visit may be available. New York has a Family Reunion or Private Family Visitation program that allows some inmates and their families to visit alone in a mobile home on the prison grounds for 24 hours or longer. Similar programs are available to some inmates in California and Mississippi. Such visits are not frequent and are subject to restrictions.

### **What to Wear**

Each state prison has rules regarding how visitors dress, usually prohibiting short shorts, athletic shorts, plunging necklines, and bare midriffs and backs. Some facilities restrict the color of clothing and types of jackets, sweaters or vests. These rules may not always be enforced with young children. Dress conservatively - at least at the first visit, until you learn the local customs. Enforcement of dress codes and other visiting regulations may not be consistent from visit to visit, because different staff interpret rules in different ways.

Always ask if there is a written dress code. Dress discreetly and comfortably for what may be a very long day with the possibility of surprise rules. If traveling long distances, bring extra clothing to change into after an all night bus ride. In California and a other few states, there are hospitality centers outside some prisons. These hospitality centers welcome visitors and provide meeting and resting places where visitors can change clothes.

## **What to Bring**

Generally, few items may be brought into the visiting room. Depending on a facility's rules, exceptions may be made for diaper bag and diapers, baby bottles, combs or small amounts of money. Prohibited items are generally stored in a locker during the visit. Required medication or baby food may be held by the security staff until needed. Rules against bringing in items to entertain children can be a big challenge.

Keeping small children occupied during the waiting period and during the visit is not easy. A few facilities provide some kind of entertainment for children. A very few have special children's centers where parents and children can spend time together working on art projects, playing games or reading books.

In a few states, prisons may provide table games or child care programs where children can be left for short periods to play. Some facilities run televisions and VCR's to amuse children during the visit.

## **What to Do**

Physical contact poses a host of problems for correctional facilities as well as families. State facilities typically allow "acceptable physical contact" during the visit, most often an embrace and kiss at the beginning and end of the visit, and brief kisses and embraces during the course of the visit.

Some adults deprived of intimate physical contact over a long period of time can be extremely creative and persistent in finding ways around restrictions on contact. Children have been conceived in prison visiting rooms.

Such behavior in the presence of children can be extremely damaging. Every effort should be made to focus the attention of visits with incarcerated parents on the visiting children. Adults should limit themselves to expressions of intimacy that do not exclude the children or make them uncomfortable.

Even when the child's own parent is not involved in overtly sexual behavior, it is sometimes difficult to prevent children from witnessing sexual behavior. To avoid this, try to keep children intently engaged in their own visits. Also, try sitting close to the front of the visiting room where correction officers are posted, as the most determined couples tend to avoid this part of the room.

To maintain their own relationships, adults should try to schedule additional visits that do not include children. They should avoid, as much as possible, the presence of children during expressions of intimacy, arguments or other conversations children don't need to hear.

## **Food**

Usually facilities do not allow visitors to bring food into the visit. Some visiting rooms have vending machines that sell food, beverages and cigarettes. Don't count on it. Eat something as close to the time of the visit as possible, and spare yourself the cost of expensive machine products. Knowing the cost of vendor food and having the correct change will help when children are hungry and fussing.

## **Photographs**

Some prisons may have an opportunity for inmate and family to pose for Polaroid pictures in the visiting room. Though they may be expensive (often \$2 each), a photo of the child and her/his parent can be an important keepsake for the child, the prisoner, and other family members.

## **Advance Notice**

If possible, let the inmate know when you will be coming to visit. If there is time, write the inmate and ask for confirmation by return letter or telephone. A prisoner expecting a visit is likely to be showered and ready when called out to the visit. This can reduce waiting time. Also, this will decrease the chance you will come when the prisoner is receiving a visit from someone else—such as a lawyer or friend.

An inmate who has received advance notice expects a visit. The inmate will wait and worry all day if the expected visitor does not show. If you cannot visit as scheduled, try to call the inmate's counselor or other

official and beg her/him to tell the inmate. There is no guarantee the message will be received, so it's best to show up when you say you will.

### **Friction Between Corrections and Families**

Correctional systems are operated to maintain security. They are not usually oriented to helping families of prisoners. While some correctional administrators see the value of the family in maintaining order and enhancing rehabilitation, there is often friction between visitors and corrections staff.

Many family members, especially children, see uniformed correction officers as an extension of a law enforcement system that unjustly captured and shackled their loved ones. Many staff see visitors as sources of contraband and disruption. Although there are many extraordinary and extremely professional correction officers, some days it can seem that none of them are assigned to the visiting area.

Too often, visitors don't feel welcome, corrections staff don't feel appreciated, inmates don't feel respected, and children don't get what they deserve from the experience. Yet, in this context families try to maintain relationships, communicate, and strengthen family bonds. Much needs to be done to improve the correctional response to families, and to help families communicate constructively.

**Communication Tips CPL 107** For Prisoners and their Families

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL107-CommunicationTips.html>

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

### **Communication is the Source of Relationships.**

Communication produces, sustains and empowers relationships. For children whose parents are incarcerated, communication with the parent in prison is essential. Without communication, their adjustment and long term well being may be compromised. But opportunities for communication between children and their incarcerated parents are limited. These communications are carefully defined and rigorously controlled, both by the prison and by the children's adult caregivers.

For many children, the prison visit may be the first time their parents have really taken the time to talk to them, to share their thoughts and feelings, to listen to them, to spend time with them. Even when contact is limited to letters and phone calls, children can be greatly sustained by a parent's encouragement, support, and listening ear. This is difficult at best—but meaningful communication between children and their prisoner parents is possible.

### **Conversations Parents and Children Can Have**

Some of the questions children have are discussed in CPL 103, Conversations: Questions Children Ask. These questions usually arise around the time a parent is incarcerated. Over the months or years of an incarceration, and even after a parent is released, children will continue to ask questions. These questions and their answers are part of an ongoing relationship between a child and her/his incarcerated parent. This relationship will require and thrive on many kinds of communication.

### **Communicating by Mail**

Letters are a valuable tool for communication between children and their prisoner parents. Letters to and from children can provide an opportunity to share feelings without fear of judgment or shame. Some children can better express their anger and hurt in writing and drawing—clearing the way for a closer relationship in the future.

Some incarcerated parents can better express their affection and remorse in a letter without the embarrassment they may feel in a personal conversation. Saving the letters from an ongoing correspondence can be like keeping a journal. Re-reading a parent's letters over time can give a child a tangible experience of a growing relationship.

To communicate with a parent by mail, children may need help. Most children have difficulty writing letters. For children of prisoners letter writing is often complicated by an array of obstacles. These obstacles include prison regulations and caregivers who may not want to stay connected to the inmate parent. Also, children's feelings of sadness, abandonment and rage are very difficult to put into words. However, when adults work together they can help children cope with these obstacles.

### **How Caregivers Can Help with Mail**

Talk with children often about things they wish they could tell their parent. Make a running list of these things that can be put in a letter to Mom or Dad. Plan for holidays and special occasions. Most gifts are not allowed to be sent into a prison or jail. Find out what is allowed and use this list to help children choose items for birthdays or holidays.

Talk about other types of gifts that can be sent, such as a photograph of the child in a hand made paper frame. When children make gifts at school such as clay pots and wooden items, encourage them to take a picture of the item. They can send the picture to Mom or Dad or keep a "treasure box" of these gifts to give to their parent upon release.

Other good items to help the child send are greeting cards (homemade or store bought), school tests and copies of report cards, diplomas and awards.

Send school papers to parents. Most children and their parents have an easier time with school work that received a good grade, but encourage children to send their less than perfect work as well. Some incarcerated parents feel more connected to their children when they see papers and tests that children need help with, especially when they can write back with ideas and questions.

For children who cannot write, an adult can "take dictation" and write the children's message for them. A stack of stamped envelopes, already addressed to the parent, can help children send messages or drawings whenever they like. But don't address too many, most prisoners are moved often during their incarceration.

Many children may need prompting from caregivers to keep in touch with the parent in prison. Some occasions are especially appropriate for prompting: getting school pictures, the parent's birthday, and holidays. Keep a calendar with these dates and reminders on it. Put this calendar where the child can see and reach it.

Parents in jails and prisons may also need help communicating with their child. Family members can help by reminding them of birthdays and giving advice about the child's interests. They can let them know a child's real feelings and thoughts. If the relationship between the prisoner and the child's caregiver is strained, the parent in prison may also need "permission" to write or encouragement to write often.

### **How Parents in Prison Can Help with Mail**

Children of prisoners usually love getting letters from their parents. They may not write back in a timely fashion, but that does not mean that these letters are not welcomed..

Write often. Just as most young children would rather have five pennies than one nickel, younger kids would rather get many notes and cards than a few long letters.

Prisoners can clip and send cartoons and photos from newspapers and magazines.  
Write letters in large block letters so they are easy for the child to read.

Prisoners with artistic talent can draw pictures of where they live, work, eat, and exercise to help children understand their parents' daily lives.

Some prisoners send line drawings or tracings of familiar television or cartoon characters, for their children to color and send back.

Add-on drawing activities are great fun. The parent begins a drawing and sends it to the child, asking them to add on to it and send it back. This can go on for some time, back and forth.

Older children may not need block letters or cartoons, but they do need to know they are in their parent's thoughts. Notes and cards of all kinds are appreciated.

Some older children like to play paper games like tic-tac-toe and hang man that can be sent back and forth. Versions of crossword puzzles, boggle, chess and checkers as well as inventions based on current computer games have been created by children to send to parents in jail.

Ask children lots of questions in your letters. Ask about school, friends, TV, pets and sports.

See if there is a book that your child is reading that you could get from the prison library. When parents and children read the same book, lots of great conversation can happen on the phone, in letters and in visits.

See if your prison has a program where you can read a book to your child on audio or video tape.

Encourage your child to send you school papers and report cards. Ask your child to even send papers that aren't so good. Then you can help your child with school by writing ideas in your next letter or talk about it on the phone.

Remember not to be harsh or overly critical about your child's work, drawings or letters, even when you are disappointed about their grades, or the frequency of their letters to you. When you need to correct them or voice concern, emphasize what they did right as well as what needs improvement.

Even if you do not know where your child is, your letters are returned, or you have been asked not to write...write anyway. Letters written but not sent can be stored away for a time when the child will be able to read them. At that time the child will know that she or he was thought about and cared for from a distance.

Many parents in prison had trouble learning to read in school. If you have trouble reading, you are not alone. Hold on to the letters until you find a friend or counselor that you trust and ask for help. Find out if there are adult or family literacy classes at your prison.

### **Communicating by Phone or in the Visiting Room**

It's often hard for parents and children to communicate, even without the barriers of incarceration. Teens and pre-teens, who seem to be able to talk endlessly to friends, and "live" on the phone have a hard time talking with parents for more than a few minutes. For prisoners and their children, opportunities to talk are limited. Finding things to talk about is challenging. The parent often feels pressure to make the conversations count, to make the communication meaningful. Parents may feel rejected when the child has little to say. In this stressful situation, parents often resort to asking a million questions—questions that children experience as intrusive. Parents and children alike, worry that talk of the outside world will be upsetting to everyone.

What really counts is the parent listening to the child. The subject of the conversation is not so important. Whether talking in the visiting room or on the telephone, here are some tips for prisoner parents.

Don't be afraid to ask about the child's life. Not asking may make children feel that you are not interested, or worried about the answers.

Remember that children like their privacy. They may not want to reveal some things about their lives, or they may want to tell you things slowly over time.



If children react as if you are invading their privacy, back off.

Do things “together-apart.” Read the same book, plan to watch the same TV show, do amateur astronomy and watch for changes in the moon or stars.

Ask about topics like the weather, sports and music. These are part of the everyday lives of most kids.

### **Games to Help to Keep Communication Going**

Some prisons will have toys and games available for visits.

A deck of cards can be made by drawing hearts, spades, clubs and diamonds, along with numbers and letters, on small pieces of paper.

Create and expand each other’s stories. The parent or child begins a story, and they take turns adding to it.

Most prisons allow writing paper and pencils for word games like hang-man, tic-tac-toe, guessing games, and math games.

Phone games include riddles, developmentally appropriate jokes and “I spy something...” saying that you see something of a specific color or shape and letting the child guess what it might be.

Make sure everyone gets a turn when playing games on the phone or in a visit.

### **Long Distance Discipline**

Trying to discipline a child from prison is difficult. For some families it gives relief to caregivers and helps keep the prisoner parent involved. For other families it causes resentment and stress for one, or both of the adults. For most families, too much focus on discipline can use up valuable communication time and leave children feeling hurt and angry.

Parents in prison can help guide or correct children’s behaviors. They can listen to the child’s feelings and talk about family rules and values. They can reinforce the consequences imposed by the caregiver and give advice about dealing with problems in the future.

Sometimes the child is brought to the visit by the caregiver just to be reprimanded by the prisoner parent. The custodial parent or grandparent may ask the incarcerated parent to discipline the child on the telephone. Outside adults should be careful not to use the visit or phone time only for discipline, or to tell all the “sins” committed by the child. The child will lose interest in visiting and talking to their parent. The child will lose interest in visiting and talking to their parent if every contact feels like a lecture or reprimand. Parents in prison should resist the temptation to preach about their own mistakes and trouble with the law. Let the child’s behavior stand separate from the parent’s crime. Children who can communicate freely and often with their incarcerated parent will also be more open to discipline from them.

### **Promises, Promises**

Sometimes the lack of comfortable topics for conversation will lead incarcerated parents to speak about how it will be when the parent and child are reunited. It is wonderful to keep hope alive. But promises about what the parent will do, buy, and get for the child are easy to make, and hard to keep. Promises shift the relationship from today into an uncertain future. Children need help coping with reality, not living in a dream.

### **When Children Don’t Want to Communicate**

There are times when children may not want to talk or visit. There is no simple answer to what should be done about this. There are many possible reasons the child does not want contact with the parent in prison. The child’s relationship with the parent prior to incarceration may have been strained. The prison environment may feel threatening, awkward or embarrassing. Traveling to visits can be stressful and boring. The visiting process itself can be humiliating and tedious.

Some or all of the above may be issues for most children of prisoners. So it is not surprising that children sometimes resist contact with their inmate parent. Notice if the child resists both phone conversations and visits. This may suggest there is a problem in the relationship. If the child only avoids visits, perhaps the time or conditions of visiting are the problem. At some ages children have busy lives. At those ages they have little time for their parents, incarcerated or not. Sometimes children don't like to go to prison because they feel ignored, they feel tension between their family members or they are bored during the visit. It is best not to force children to visit or talk. Sometimes, however, parents give up too easily and don't try to convince a child to communicate. To children, this can seem to confirm that contact wasn't a good idea.

### **When Children Resist Contact**

Let children know that you expect them to talk or visit sometimes.

If a child's reaction to this expectation is extreme, back off and try again in a few weeks.

Don't give up calling or asking to see them no matter how rejected you feel.

### **An Important Exception**

Sometimes, a child's resistance to contact is the result of abuse by the parent. These children need counseling. Visits and phone calls could interfere with treatment.

Remember also that more than three out of four prisoners have histories of addiction and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Children of alcoholics and drug addicts may be almost relieved to have contact with their parents in jail because they are more likely to be sober. They may have anger and resentment that needs to be resolved before they can trust their parents enough to talk or visit.

When children don't want to visit for any reason, parents in prison need to seek help from counselors, social workers and friends. It's hard to cope with a child's rejection. Many prisoners do not want to be reminded of the hurt they have caused. The anger of their children speaks volumes about the damage done.

Some prisoners are focused on their own pain and can't see the impact they have had on their children. Some children are focused on getting on with their lives and can't see the need for a relationship with their imprisoned parent. Patience, support from family and friends and good information about how children of prisoners cope will help.

### ***The Caregiver's Situation CPL 307***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL307-CaregiverSituation.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

When a child's parent goes to prison or jail, with rare exception, the child mourns. They may miss the parent that played with them or cooked for them or watched TV with them, and doing these things may increase their sadness. Or, if their incarcerated parent was not very available before imprisonment, the child may mourn the loss of the hope of what might have been if only Mom or Dad had not gone away.

Either way, the time when a parent is imprisoned is a time when children wait and often hope. They wait for Mom or Dad to come back to take care of them, the way they did before, or, they wait for the return of a parent who has been changed and "made better" by their time in prison. They also hope that this time Mom or Dad will stay.

The caregivers of children of prisoners may have many things in common. They all cope with the criminal justice system, deal with the impact on the children, have to find ways to make ends meet, deal with their own feelings toward the child's parents, and struggle with how to answer children's questions. But each family and each care giving circumstance is also unique.

Caregivers could be the incarcerated parent's parent, another grandparent, an aunt, or older sibling. A caregiver might be a family friend, foster parent or group home staff member. Some caregivers took on the responsibility by default because there was no one else, while others were already the guardians of the children before the incarceration of the parent.

Some caregivers are unrelated to the child by blood but are the friends or girlfriends or boyfriends or partners of one of the child's parents. Some children are in foster care with adults that they did not know before their parent went to prison. In some cases, children moved far away from the homes they were living in prior to their parents arrest and incarceration and find themselves in new and unfamiliar environments.

Meanwhile, most caregivers are expected to raise the children, keep them connected in some way to their imprisoned parent, earn a living, and care for other members of the family. It may be difficult for caregivers to respond consistently to the feelings and behaviors of the children of prisoners in their care.

Teachers, health care providers, social workers, clergy and those that work as coaches, librarians and recreation directors are not trained to help children or their caregivers to cope with this crisis.

### **Influences on the Caregivers' Ability to Cope**

- The degree of familiarity they have with the child
- The intensity of change and upheaval in the child's life
- Economic stress/stability or the oppression of poverty
- Degree of isolation, whether in urban, suburban, or rural settings.
- Caregiver's health and emotional well being
- Quality of the child's school
- Caregiver's job satisfaction
- Community resources
- Support of family and friends
- Family spirituality and faith
- The impact of racial and ethnic prejudices
- Presence of knowledgeable professionals

### ***Caring for Children of Prisoners CPL 201***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL201-CaringforChildren.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

### **Different Ages/Different Issues**

Having a parent in prison or jail poses different challenges for the child at each stage of development.

#### **Infancy: the first year of life**

It may seem that a baby less than one year old would not react to the incarceration of a parent, but this is an important stage of development. Infants are learning to connect or attach to their caregivers. They are learning to trust that adults are there to meet their needs.

In this attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent. They may even miss a parent that was inconsistently available to the child prior to incarceration. If a primary caregiver parent "disappears" to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust. Attachments can develop between infants and their new caregivers. But the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placement, and by any further disruptions in care giving relationships.

#### **Toddlers: 1 and 2 year olds**

Toddlers want to see if their attachments to the important adults in their world will hold up to their new needs. They need to run away and they need to say "NO." Practicing these new verbal and motor skills will make the adults react in ways that feel controlling to the toddler. Toddlers want to be independent, not controlled—but they also want to feel safe. The tug between the desire for independence and the need to

be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge any caregiver.

Caregivers of children of prisoners pour emotional and physical resources into managing life in the criminal justice system and have little left for coping with a toddler's extreme upsets.

### **Pre-Schoolers: 3-5 years**

This is often called the age of opposition, power and control battles and magical thinking. At this stage of development, children need to prove to themselves that they are separate and unique, that they are themselves and not their caregivers.

"If I cooperate with you, I become you. And since I am me, not you, I will not cooperate and if you make me, I will hate you and wish you away." This is not really a thought but more a gut instinct in most 4 to 6 year-olds.

The new demands made by the adult world for self-control may lead children at this age to apply magical thinking and fantasy to the circumstances of their parent's incarceration. Pre-schoolers believe they are responsible in ways that are both illogical and unreasonable. They may believe that they wished the parent away when they were mad at them.

They may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting, sleeplessness, and eating disruptions. They may also develop fears, nightmares, and a return to the aggressive tantrums of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know that they have some influence on adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development to avoid feelings of guilt, loss of control, powerlessness, and loyalty conflicts that could have lasting consequences.

### **Early School-age: 5-8 years**

The grade school child is beginning to replace parents as the center of their universe. These children will experience sadness at the separation, but have moved out into the world, are learning new skills, and are focused on their peer group. At this stage of development, children do understand the concept of "crime and punishment." As one first grader put it, "My Mommy is doing a really long time out." As they begin to focus on affiliating with other children, however, they become aware of the stigma of parental incarceration.

Early school-age children need to experience success and develop a sense of competence, with their adults and with peers. This makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates about parent's arrest or incarceration. They are not yet able to articulate the story or the feelings well enough to both satisfy peers and avoid upsetting or embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation and family loyalty can lead children to avoid school, develop physical ailments, and sometimes stop talking unless they are at home.

### **Pre-adolescence: 9-11 years**

Pre-adolescence is the stage of social emotions. Children struggle to understand the fact that "right and wrong" can vary from family to family. They are striving to learn about their own feelings about peers and family members and to understand the meaning behind the behaviors of others. Adults need to provide labels for children's feelings without judging them.

Adults also need to provide children with good role models and teach children communication skills by saying what they mean and listening with compassion. Pre-adolescents are also making more choices on their own about homework, activities, and friends.

They need to be respected for their opinions and tastes. They may choose to distance themselves from the relationship with an incarcerated parent, partly to exercise their choice but also to avoid embarrassment.

Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Adults who act scared or angry but say "I am fine" will seriously confuse the developmental process of pre-adolescents. Such mixed messages may lead to acting out in an effort to understand what is really going on.

### **Adolescence**

Teens are out in the world, trying to figure out who they are, where they are going, and who they want to go with them. They are also balancing taking risks and avoiding danger.

Many adolescents with incarcerated parents have experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent due to previous imprisonments or a chaotic lifestyle. Their experience has often included addictions, financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools, and communities lacking in resources.

Adolescents are often expected to assume adult roles. They may be left for long periods without supervision. They can suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent. They can, all at once, fear that they will turn out like their incarcerated parent, attempt to be like them, and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Keep in mind that children will react in many different ways to their parents' imprisonment. These reactions depend on their age, personality, family circumstances, environmental stress, details of the crime and incarceration and available supports.

### ***What Do Children of Prisoners and Their Caregivers Need? CPL 203***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL203-WhatDoChildren.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

### **From Interviews with Caregivers**

Every child, family, and circumstance is different. Some children are used to parents who were not around much before their incarceration. Some children have parents who are unpredictable because of depression or drugs or alcohol. Other children's parents were actively involved with them before they went to jail or prison.

Some children may have been traumatized by witnessing a violent arrest or may have a history of traumatizing experiences. Some children of prisoners may have no contact with their parent; others talk to their incarcerated parent every day.

Some children move to a new city or state. Some change schools or go into day care so their caregivers can work. Children will need different things from caregivers depending on their age, temperament and personality, the family circumstances, the facts and details of the crime, and the availability of outside resources.

### **Most Children of Prisoners Need**

- Consistent caring adults who understand that, in general, children love their parents, even when they have committed a crime
- People who will not condemn the incarcerated parents as worthless
- People who will understand that children of prisoners feel angry, sad, confused, and worried
- A chance to express these feelings and learn to cope with them

- A chance to learn and practice skills and keep busy with activities
- Faith or affiliation with a community that can provide meaning for the child beyond their own crisis
- People who can help them to maintain contact with their incarcerated parent or parents or explain to them why they cannot maintain contact

### **Most Caregivers Need**

- Support and understanding from friends, family, clergy, and the community
- Emotional support, such as counseling or group activities
- Information about children of incarcerated parents as well as about services in the community
- Guidance about what is generally best for children and how to answer their questions
- Rules, boundaries, and space in the home: for the children, for the family and for the caregiver
- Opportunities for respite care and relief from the duties of care giving
- Help with managing the needs and services that are all too often fragmented, unavailable, or costly

### ***Tips for Caregivers - from Caregivers CPL 204***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL204-TipsFromCaregivers.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

#### **Talk about feelings with children**

“You look sad. Are you missing Daddy?” or, “When you get that angry at little things I wonder if you are also angry at your Mom for going to jail?” or, “I wish your dad could have seen you play ball tonight and I bet you do too.”

#### **Be as honest with children as possible**

“Mommy won’t be coming home for a very long time. It will be 4 more birthdays (or 2 more summer vacations).”

#### **Remember to keep your feelings separate from each child’s**

“We feel different things about this, I am angry at your dad and don’t really want to see him but I want you to go because he’s your Dad and you love him.”

#### **Set up family discussion times**

Tuesday night is the family “meeting.” Or Wednesday night is “Let’s wait for dad’s call tonight and talk about how we are all doing with this.” Or Saturday morning’s breakfast is a “prison and jail talk is off limits” time—a moment of relief to those who need a break from the subject.

#### **Talk about the family’s choice to tell others or keep it a secret from certain people.**

Let children know why the choice is necessary. Provide plenty of opportunity to talk about it at home.

#### **Encourage children to write or talk to their parents whenever possible.**

For ideas on this, see CPL 106, Jail and Prison Procedures and CPL 107, Communication Tips.

#### **Help children to start a picture or story that their parent adds onto, then the child adds on, and so on and so on by mailing it back and forth.**

#### **Read with your children.**

Encourage your library to include books and pamphlets about children of prisoners in its collection.

#### **Get support and help for the children and yourself...through friends, clergy, or counselors.**

## ***Impact of Parental Incarceration CPL 301***

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL301-ImpactofIncarceration.html>

*Adapted from Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin

### **About Prisoners and Their Children**

When parents go to prison or jail, their children suffer. The loss of a parent to incarceration can precipitate trauma and disruption that few experience without serious consequences. This loss often compounds or exacerbates existing environmental stress such as poverty, poor schools and violent neighborhoods.

Incarcerated parents were often themselves raised by adults who were chemically dependant, abusive or both. They are likely to have learned to cope and adapt to trauma and distress by lashing out at others and by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. They can lack the ability to attach to others and may not have internalized adequate or healthy models of child rearing. For many prisoner parents, rage, depression and addiction is and has been a part of life followed by the criminal activity that addiction can require and rage often causes.

Indeed, some prisoners are incarcerated because of crimes against other family members, including parents imprisoned for domestic or sexual violence or homicides involving their own children or their children's other parent. *However, these are relatively rare occurrences—not typical of incarcerated parents and their children.*

The ideas in the Children of Prisoners Library that relate to contact and relationships between imprisoned parent and child may not be appropriate in cases where the child or a parent were victims of the crime. Such cases require intense interventions for everyone involved. Contact in those cases must be handled in a therapeutic environment and with the advice of professionals in mental health and child welfare.

Always remember that every family and every circumstance is different. The impact of parental incarceration on the children and the family will vary with these differing circumstances. There are, however, some common themes and consistent realities that emerge in the stories of prisoners' children.

Children of prisoners will experience loss of the parent that cared for them—or of the possibility of a nurturing parent. This loss may include relief that a parent is no longer able to hurt themselves or others. Perhaps the loss is accompanied by satisfaction that the parent will be punished or hope that they will change. But loss remains a consistent reaction to the incarceration of a parent.

When children are present at the arrest of their parent, the loss of separation can be compounded by powerlessness, and violence. In some cases, the child may see police indifference or brutality.

Many children of incarcerated parents exhibit symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without hyperactivity) and Attachment Disorders.

Most children of prisoners are cared for by family members. Some remain in stable environments while others are moved to new communities or schools. Many children are plunged into economic hardship or deeper poverty as a result of the incarceration of a family member.

As their caregivers struggle to cope, some children will be exposed to the new or continued substance abuse of family members. They may also experience sexual or physical abuse. Children, who are placed in foster care, often endure multiple placements and are at increased risk for physical and sexual abuse.

Children with parents in jail or prison feel stigmatized even when they live in communities where many people have family and friends who are incarcerated. Some children even appear to be boastful as they defend against the pain and embarrassment.

Children of prisoners, who live with any or all of these conditions and risk factors, have difficulty in school and experience both academic and social failure.

### **Remember**

Children of prisoners are rarely helped by not having their parent in their lives in some way. Without that parent, children mourn. Some mourn the loss of the parent that was available to care for them. Others mourn the loss of what “could have been.”

(For a more in-depth discussion, see CPL 304: Different Children/Different Emotions.)

While caregivers of children of prisoners are often unsure about what to tell them and whether or not to take them to visit, most children adjust better when they are told the truth about their parents whereabouts and when contact between parents and children is maintained.

Visits to a parent in prison or jail are usually helpful in keeping children connected to their parents. There are often however behavioral reactions (increased aggression or anxiety) after visits as children adapt or re-adapt to their loss. These behaviors are difficult and can cause adults to recommend against visiting the incarcerated parent.

Studies do show that most children manage the crisis of parental incarceration better when they visit their parents. But it usually takes time for children and families to cope with the feelings that the visits raise. While not visiting is sometimes easier on the emotions in the short run, out of sight, is not out of mind. Distance leaves a lot of confusion, questions, imagined dangers and fears for kids to deal with. These feelings may show up in problem behaviors at home, school or both and can be harmful to the child over time. (For a more in-depth look at visitation issues see CPL 105: Visiting Mom or Dad.)

Public reaction often dismisses the experiences of children of prisoners as so typical of a group or community as not to need intervention, or as so complicated as to be beyond help. This poses obstacles to the families as they seek services. It also, directly or indirectly, influences policies and practices in many community programs.

Incarcerated parents, their children, families and communities are disproportionately African American or Hispanic. Racial discrimination can lead people to dismiss a group or community’s situation as hopeless or to view valuable programs and interventions as a waste of resources.

Concepts such as “environmental modeling” or “genetic and cultural predisposition” sometimes provide intellectual cover for giving up on this group of high-risk families and on their communities.

*Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.*

### **Common Stress Points CPL 303**

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL303-CommonStressPoints.html>

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

A parent’s involvement in the criminal justice system often results in a series of crises: arrest, trial, incarceration, and re-entry. Each *stress point* presents new obstacles for children and families. Children and families experience unexpected emotions and challenges to established coping strategies.

#### **The Arrest: Fear, Confusion and Panic**

The trauma experienced by children who have a parent taken from them is extraordinary, perhaps more so if the child witnesses the arrest of the parent. The image of the person you love and respect being chained and dragged away is devastating. Even for children who do not witness the arrest, this image is terrifying.



Fueled by negative media images, children imagine the worst about their parent's condition. Families and children rarely have any information about the arrest, arraignment and detention process. They have no idea how, when and if they will ever see the arrested person again.

### **Pre-trial and During Trial: Anxiety and Frustration**

The arrested parent may be detained in jail to await trial or may be released on bail. In either case, this is a period of great uncertainty. No plans can be made.

Children whose worlds have been disrupted are often unable to get answers to their questions. They do not know what is expected of them or when the family will be torn apart by outside forces.

### **Sentencing: Hopelessness and Helplessness**

For the child or other family members, the sentence usually comes as a shock. To many outside the family, this can seem odd. But the sentence makes the fears of separation a reality for the incarcerated parent as well as the children and other family members.

No matter how hopeless a case looks, most families continue to hope for a miracle until the very last minute. The sentencing is the very last minute, the time when hope dies.

### **Initial incarceration: Abandonment, Stigma and Resentment**

For the child and other family members, the set of emotions experienced are often compared to the loss of a family member through death. This metaphor does not take into consideration how shame and humiliation about prison life affects the child along with economic or other calamities.

Children are well aware of the gravity of the situation and likely to conjure up horrible visions of what life in prison is like for their parents. Further complicating problems include the reluctance of many custodial parents to allow children to visit a prison.

### **Pre- and Post Release: Ambivalence**

Interestingly, the times just before and after release are often the most traumatic for children and families. Problems, which were central to a family's culture before incarceration, have rarely been handled during the prison term. Children have changed during the parent's incarceration. They are older and at different stages of development. They have different needs and expectations. Yet imprisoned parents may not have seen the growth. Released prisoners often treat their children as if they were still at the age of initial incarceration.

The custodial parent has also changed. In two-parent families, he or she has had to become both mother and father and has gained independence and competence in areas formerly ceded entirely to the incarcerated partner. There may be considerable tension about how the relationship between the parents is to go forward.

Incarceration changed the newly released parent as well. In prison, he or she suffered a loss of identity and respect and made few decisions. The environment was filled with anger and hostility, kindness was interpreted as weakness, and there was no privacy. Release to freedom carries with it the danger that needs and emotions kept in check will come boiling up or explode.

This period is also filled with expectations of a new life and mended ways. Children and adults alike will feel an array of emotions including the ambivalence that comes with such radical changes and adjustments. Behavioral reactions will vary with each child and the environment.

The troublesome behaviors children exhibit can also be transient – appearing shortly after arrest or after the parent leaves and subsiding temporarily only to reappear at a later point. Some children react immediately to stress, challenging the adults to protect them and prove that they are competent caregivers. Other children seem to sense that the adults are vulnerable and may not be able to manage the distress. These

children often act out their feelings at school or with a “protective” adult or they will hold it together until the adult seems O.K. Then, they will fall apart.

There are children who can even wait until the incarcerated parent is released to really express their rage and others who will not deal with their feelings until years after the parent’s release. While there are many variations in how children and families manage each stage of involvement in the criminal justice system, the emotional impact will always cause some degree of stress and trauma.

*Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.*

**Challenges for Health Care Providers CPL 302**  
<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL302-Challenges.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

## **PRINCIPLES**

- Continue to focus primarily on the health and well being of the child
- Expand the concept of child health to include parent-child relationships and the impact of parental behaviors and circumstances
- Understand the risk factors that contribute to the continuum of risk for negative outcomes in children of prisoners
- Be aware of the common stress points and typical reactions that are a part of the process for prisoners and their families
- Build trust and an atmosphere of safety as a context for effective communication
- Ask about the rules and realities of prison visiting before giving advice or making recommendations.

## **Know the Facts**

It can be dangerous to rely on assumptions, biases, and personal experiences and opinions when dealing with difficult social issues. The issue of parental incarceration is especially difficult for pediatric health care professionals.

Co-morbidity of parental mental illness along with addictions and the presence of criminality can make accurate mental health diagnoses and intervention strategies nearly impossible for adult health care providers, as well as for the justice system. The impact of parental mental health and high-risk behaviors on child development and pediatric practice is still emerging as an area of major importance to the health care industry.

There are few data that can guide decisions related to the impact of prison visitation on child physical and emotional health or on the long-term impact of the incarceration of a parent on child outcomes. Helping professionals seeking information regarding outcomes for children of incarcerated parents often rely on data related to children’s reactions to divorce or death of a parent.

Clinical observations and anecdotal information continue to show that while there are some similarities between adjustment to divorce or death of a parent, children’s reactions to the imprisonment of a parent warrant distinct and separate attention and responses.

The involvement of the criminal justice system in the lives of children is in and of itself an issue for consideration by pediatric health care providers.

## **Know the Rules**

Caregivers may ask if a child’s health records can be sent to the incarcerated parent. Health care providers may not know how hard it is for caregivers to consult by phone with the parent in prison. Caregivers may express an urgent need to toilet train or wean a child from bottle or pacifier to make prison visiting easier.

Understanding the rules about what prisons allow will help the health care provider to respond more effectively to these and other issues.

Health care providers may also need details about the atmosphere and procedures related to prison visitation in order to answer parent's questions and address issues related to exposure to TB, HIV and HEP C. There are no known cases of these diseases being transmitted to prison visitors. Yet, parents and concerned adults in the lives of children of prisoners will sometimes use the fear of exposure to these diseases as reason to object to prison visits for children. Parents need to be told about how these diseases are transmitted and that prison visits will not cause any more exposure to these diseases than school, a crowded city bus, or even the clinic.

It's important to ask about the rules and realities of prison visiting before giving advice or making recommendations. Each facility may do things differently. Explore how things work in the facilities affecting the families you work with. Discussion of these issues related to the family's experience can be included in the routine of check ups and as part of developmental surveillance.

### **Building Trust**

It is often frightening for a family member to reveal the details related to the incarceration of their relative to health care providers. Such a discussion is most likely to happen in the context of an on-going relationship where trust has been established or in the context of extreme anonymity, to a stranger that will never be seen again. When parents or caregivers do reveal information about their involvement in the criminal justice system, health care providers will do much to build trust if they react non-judgmentally and fully address the questions and concerns without discomfort or avoidance.

It is also important to remember that while many families of prisoners share common characteristics, there are also many variations. Each family is unique, and it is dangerous to make assumptions.

### **Continuum of Risk**

There is a continuum of risk. At one end of the continuum are families that are in grave danger. At the other end are families with adequate support systems that are coping well. In between are large numbers of families that are barely managing and are under extreme pressure.

There are some variables that can influence a child or family's ability to cope with the incarceration of a family member. Screening for these supports could be included in a routine health care visit for families of prisoners.

### **Coping Variables**

- Economic stability
- Health status and emotional capacity of caregivers
- Quality of the child's school
- Job satisfaction (teens and adults)
- Support vs. isolation in the community environment: urban, suburban or rural
- Community resources
- Child and family spirituality
- Racial and ethnic prejudices

The initial discussion of the impact of incarceration on a family is really the beginning of an ongoing process of observation and support. Some families will raise issues related to the incarcerated parent every time you see them; others will only mention it if there is a change in circumstances or a new concern. Still others will not discuss it again and will assume that just telling the health care provider was all that was necessary. When health care providers are aware of the typical stress points, emotional reactions, and behavioral responses of children and families of prisoners, they can use this awareness to formulate checkpoints for anticipatory guidance.

Health care professionals can use indirect and open-ended questions about the child's adjustment, the visits at the prison, or how the caregiver is coping. These statements let the family know that they are comfortable talking about incarceration and its impact. Children and family members with "slow to warm" temperament styles may need several such encounters with the provider before they can open up or even respond at all.

Balancing genuine concern and interest with respect for the family's privacy is tricky. Remember that the relationship is key. In an atmosphere of trust and safety, parents and caregivers are often relieved to have a place to ask questions about the effects of parental incarceration on the child's health and development. Even if they do not respond to the health care provider's initial support or comments, they are likely to do so over time.

*Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.*

### **Different Children/ Different Behaviors CPL 304**

<http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL304-DifferentChildren.html>

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Health care providers need to know that several factors can influence the intensity of a child's reaction to parental incarceration. These factors include:

- Development
- Temperament
- Family Dynamics and Capacity
- Trauma
- Details of the Crime and Incarceration
- Available Supports

### **Development Requires That Adults:**

- Continuously use new skills and try various strategies as they respond to the child's ever-changing physical and emotional needs.
- Modulate the child's exposure to the world and keep them safe
- Interpret social expectations to guide learning and growth

Each stage of a child's development includes a primary developmental task for the child and a corresponding parenting response.

The incarceration of a parent poses different challenges at each stage.



Created by Ann Adalist-Estrin, BRIDGES, A service of Samaritan Counseling Center, Used With Permission.

**Infancy-Attachment /Predictability Age: Birth - 1 1/2**

In the attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent even if that parent was inconsistently available to the child. If a primary caregiver parent “disappears” to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust.

Trust can develop between infants and multiple caregivers but the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placements and disruptions in the relationships with primary caregivers. Infants may also develop anxious attachments or regulation difficulties in response to stress in the family, which also interferes with attachment, trust and the ability to predict the reactions of others.

**Toddlers-Autonomy /Emotional Safety Age: 1 1/2 - 3**

In the separation or autonomy stage of development, toddlers seek to test the quality of their attachments in the face of new motor and verbal skills. The tug between the desire for independence and autonomy and the need to be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge caregivers as they pour emotional and physical resources into managing life in the criminal justice system.

Caregivers may react in angry or unpredictable ways. The base of security and emotional safety that toddlers need may seem unavailable. This can increase toddlers' anxiety and resulting negative behaviors.

**Pre-Schoolers-Differentiation/ Power and Influence Age: 3-5**

In the differentiation stage children seek to establish emotional or psychological separateness from their primary attachment figures. They strive to prove their uniqueness particularly from the same gendered parent. The other parent serves often as a refuge from what can be an intense struggle. This is also the age of power and control battles and magical thinking.

“If I cooperate with you, I become you and since I am me, not you, I will not cooperate and if you make me I will hate you and wish you away.” This is not a conscious thought, but rather an unconscious motivator of behavior.

The new demands made by the adult world for self-control may also lead children of this age to apply magical thinking and fantasy to the circumstances of their parents incarceration. They believe that they are responsible in ways that are both illogical and unreasonable. They also use “transductive reasoning”...if two things happen at the same time, they are related. This further connects the child's behaviors with the adult's distress and circumstances.

Children, who have a parent leave for prison, (particularly a same gendered parent) may truly believe that they wished them away when they were in the midst of the struggle for power and hating them for the powerlessness. When a child's opposite gendered parent is incarcerated it eliminates the opportunity to use that parent as a refuge from the struggle. In both cases, pre-school children may exhibit symptoms of distress.

They may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting, sleeplessness, and eating disruptions. They will also develop fears, nightmares and a return to the aggressive tantrums of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know that they have some influence on adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development to avoid feelings of loss of control, powerlessness and loyalty conflicts that could have lasting consequences.

### **Early School Age/ Affiliation and Choice Age: 5-8**

The grade school child is beginning to replace parents as the center of their universe. They will experience sadness at the separation but have moved out into the world. They are learning new skills and focusing on the peer group. This age child is also beginning to understand that there are problems and solutions but they have not developed a mature ability to reason from one to the other. At this stage of development, children do understand the concept of "crime and punishment." As one first grader put it, "My Mommy is doing a really long time out." However, as they begin to focus on affiliating with other children, they become aware of the stigma of parental incarceration.

Early school age children need to be successful and to develop a sense of competence with adults, but more so with peers. This makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates about parent's arrest or incarceration yet unable to articulate the story or the feelings well enough to satisfy peers and to avoid upsetting or embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation and family loyalty can manifest itself in somatizations, school avoidance or phobia, selective mutism and poor school performance

### **Pre-Adolescence/ Knowing Self and Reading Others Age: 9-12**

This is the stage of social emotions. Children struggle to understand codes of ethics that vary from family to family. They are striving to learn about their own emotional reactions to peers and family members and to read the cues of others. Adults need to provide labels for children's feelings without judging them. They also serve as role models and teach children communication skills by saying what they mean and listening with compassion.

Pre-Adolescents are also making more choices on their own, about homework, activities and friends and need to be respected for their opinions and tastes. They may choose to distance themselves from the relationship with an incarcerated parent, in part to exercise the choice and also to avoid the embarrassment.

Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Acting scared or angry but saying "I am fine" seriously confuses the developmental process of this age and may cause acting out behavior in an effort to get at what is really going on.

All of this is tremendously difficult for families that are fragile or overwhelmed by managing without the incarcerated parent. Family members will give children many mixed messages and many of the children's feelings will be unacceptable to the family.

Older school aged children will need help with evolving social values in the wake of parental incarceration and the family reaction to it. They are at risk for a host of behavioral problems as they "express" the feelings that are not allowed by the family through oppositional and defiant or even delinquent behaviors. They will also need resources for resolving the emotional conflicts that are raging within themselves and in relationships.

### **Adolescence Identity /Risk Protection Age: 13+**

Teens are out in the world, forming a cohesive identity and attempting to assess the dangers involved in the risk taking impulses that come with this age.

Most adolescents with incarcerated parents have typically experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent. They have lived through previous parental imprisonments and often a lifestyle that included addictions, the chaos of financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools and communities lacking in resources. They are often expected to assume adult roles, are left for long periods without supervision and suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent.

All at once, teens can fear they will turn out like their incarcerated parent; attempt to emulate them; and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Typical patterns of behavior in response to these crises are: rejecting adult limits and authority, aggression, helplessness, hopelessness and depression, drug and alcohol use, abuse and addictions and sexual risk taking.

A version of this development outline is available for caregivers. See CPL 201, Caring for Children of Prisoners.

### **Temperament and Coping**

While the developmental norms will guide adults in understanding children's reactions to parental incarceration, it is also useful to be reminded of the unique aspects of each child. Children in similar situations with parents facing similar charges may react in widely different ways to their parents' arrest and incarceration. Children within the same family even react quite differently. For decades, theorists have looked at 9 temperament characteristics as a way of explaining the widely varying behaviors exhibited by different children at the same stages of development in the same and differing home environments.

Nine temperament qualities described here focus on infants and toddlers. Many children maintain these characteristics into adulthood. Using these nine temperamental characteristics, clinicians can help caregivers to understand the child's innate reaction patterns and unique strengths and weaknesses as well as to see how their own temperament styles affect their interactions with the children.

These temperament qualities combine then, with the child's experiences, relationships and environmental supports and stressors to form coping styles and patterns for children and for families. This notion of temperament is also a way of conceptualizing, not only how a child may behave in the wake of parental incarceration, but also how adults react to them.

### **Temperament Characteristics**

- **Activity level.** Some babies are active. They kick a lot in the uterus before they are born, they move around in their bassinets, and as toddlers, they always run. Other babies are much less active.
- **Rhythmicity.** Some babies have regular cycles of activity. They eat, sleep, and defecate on schedule almost from birth. Other babies are much less predictable.
- **Approach-withdrawal.** Some babies delight in everything new; others withdraw from every new situation. The first bath makes some babies laugh and others cry; the first spoonful of cereal is gobbled up by one baby; and spit out by the next.
- **Adaptability.** Some babies adjust quickly to change; others are unhappy at every disruption of their normal routine.
- **Intensity of reaction.** Some babies chortle when they laugh and howl when they cry. Others are much calmer, responding with a smile or a whimper.
- **Threshold or responsiveness.** Some babies seem to sense every sight, sound and touch. For instance, they waken at a slight noise, or turn away from a distant light. Others seem unaware even of bright lights, loud street noises, or wet diapers.
- **Quality of mood.** Some babies seem constantly happy, smiling at almost everything. Others seem chronically unhappy; they are ready to complain at any moment.
- **Distractibility.** All babies fuss when they are hungry; but some will stop fussing if someone gives them a pacifier or sings them a song, while others keep complaining until they are fed. Similarly, when babies spot an attractive but dangerous object and reach for it, some of them can be distracted by another, safer object while others are more single-minded.

- **Attention span.** Some babies play happily with one toy for a long time. Others quickly drop one activity for another.

*(From: Chess & Thomas, 1977)*

Individual temperament characteristics do not, in and of themselves, create behavior problems or interfere with the child's adjustment to parental incarceration. Rather it is the fit (or lack of fit) between the child's temperament and the coping style and expectations of the adults that can cause distress for everyone.

Another aspect of temperament that can interfere with a child's coping is the degree to which a parent or caregiver identifies the temperament quality as similar or identical to themselves or the child's other parent. This can, of course, endear a child when those qualities are loved and appreciated in oneself or another.

More often, however, the presence of some temperament characteristics alienate the child when those qualities are repulsive or frustrating in ones self or others. For children with parents who have caused distress in the family, their likeness to the incarcerated parent can pose obstacles to attachment and cause the child to become the target for misplaced anger.

Understanding the role of temperament and the adults response to it (positive and negative) can help caregivers to see that things like intensity of the child's reactions, the unpredictable moods, the rigidity with everyday functioning, or hypersensitivity to noise or touching may be part of the child's personality rather than caused by the family circumstances or bad parenting.

Understanding a child's temperament may also help caregivers to predict the child's reactions to new situations, to structure for long trips to visit a parent in prison or to be patient with the length of time a child takes to adjust to change.<sup>1</sup>

Some children will be easy to read. Their behaviors will show clinicians and caregivers that they are reacting to the stress of parental incarceration. Others will not be so obvious. It is important to be aware that those children who seem to be coping well with a parent's arrest or incarceration may be silently suffering intense emotions.

A child whose behavior seems "normal" may need just as much support as a child who is more obviously depressed or anxious.

### **Family Dynamics and Capacity**

How children cope with distress also depends on the capacity of the adults who care for them to protect and nurture them.

Most studies show that children who exhibit the most difficult behavior in the aftermath of parental incarceration have been subjected or exposed to multiple crises and stresses in the home. Drug and alcohol abuse, child maltreatment, domestic violence, foster care or multiple parental arrests may be a part of the child's history.

A recent study by the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents found that many of the children they studied had been previously subjected to "prenatal drug exposure, substance abuse in the home, forced removal of the parent from the home at arrest, gang activity in the family, criminal acts, and/or the violent deaths of family members, each of which has been documented to produce traumatic stress reactions in childhood."<sup>2</sup>

Current estimates are that between 60% and 80% of offenders abuse alcohol or drugs. Drug abusers can be erratic, neglectful parents. Their children are often emotionally neglected and feel that their parents have abandoned them for their drugs of choice. Addicted parents often do know they are neglectful. In fact, one definition of addiction is the continuation of a behavior in spite of knowing the consequences.<sup>3</sup>



There is some evidence, however that many drug and alcohol using parents do indeed feel responsible for their children and concerned about their well being but are unable to balance their addictions with parenting tasks and responsibilities even when they are aware of the negative impact on their children.<sup>4</sup>

All of this leaves children particularly vulnerable when a parent is arrested or incarcerated.

### **Family Coping Styles**

The following are patterns of coping that can help guide professional interventions. Remember, however, that each family is unique. Each will deal with the incarceration of a family member in its own way.

#### **The Family on Hold**

This type of family often visits their incarcerated member, writes or telephones. They take pictures of events, people and places to keep their loved one connected to their lives. Rarely, however, are feelings discussed. Anger about the crime or the incarceration, sadness, abandonment, confusion, loss, frustration and hurt are all real and ever present emotions that are left on hold to deal with upon release. There is often a focus on the positive commitment to make this period of separation “ok.”

#### **The Parallel Family**

Families in this group keep in touch by letter or phone with occasional visits. They have a “life goes on” attitude without positive or negative emotion. “This happened and we’ll deal with it.” These family members tend to develop their own lives, meet new people, learn new skills and grow in completely separate ways from the incarcerated person.

#### **The Estranged Family**

This family is cut off from the incarcerated member. Sometimes the family has decided not to maintain contact. Sometimes foster parents often have trouble coordinating visits. Often, inmates choose to limit contact with family when they are unable to cope with their feelings or the frustrations of correctional policies.

#### **The Turbulent Family**

Negative feelings are expressed in out of control ways in this family. They are rarely able to develop effective relationship skills. Contact during incarceration can become hurtful and abusive at worst, or simmering and unpredictable at best.

And so it goes with children and their families adapting to the incarceration of a parent in a variety of ways.

### **Going Home**

When the release from prison or jail finally comes, it creates a major crisis for most families. The inmate’s homecoming is likely to be shrouded by joblessness, economic hardship, or continuous poverty. In addition, role changes and restructuring of responsibilities by spouses and children can cause resentment and anger in the post parole period. A child’s adjustment to release is often related to the style of coping evident during incarceration.

- **On hold families** often feel initially relieved at their abilities to have weathered the storm. They are confident that the worst is behind them. When the intensity of family life combines with many years of unresolved anger and hurt, the outcome can be disastrous. This is especially true for children who need an opportunity to express those feelings in safety but feel that doing so may cause harm to the family.
- **The parallel family** has to reconcile their images of themselves as “the same as before incarceration” with all of the changes that have occurred. These changes often threaten the confidence of the released prisoner and pose many challenges to the relationships. Children are often faced with the dilemma of choosing to keep their “self” and risk the relationship or give up their new roles and identity to keep the relationship.

- **The estranged family** must often cope with the released prisoner's attempts to "surprise" them, reconcile the relationships and pick up where they left off. For children, the conflict caused by the decision to welcome parents back vs. rejecting their overtures may cause massive distress, internal conflicts, and loyalty issues with custodial caregivers.
- **The turbulent family** is likely to continue to operate in a volatile fashion. Children may also attempt to express feelings they were unable to during incarceration and if they fear the violent and unpredictable reactions of parents, this acting out may occur outside the family, in school or on the street.

In each of these families the effect of the parents' coping strategies on the child's development is significant.

Children abandoned by one parent need to know that there is a consistent and caring adult there for them. The way in which the remaining parent (or other caregiver) is coping with the crisis, the amount and type of contact that the child has with the incarcerated parent and the caregiver's relationship with the incarcerated parent will also have a profound effect on the child's ability to cope.

When adults are aware of the child's needs, emotions and temperament, stress will be considerably reduced. But the parent or caregiver may themselves be at risk for depression or anxiety disorders, placing children at further risk.

### **Trauma**

Parent-child separation can cause impaired parent to child bonding, attachment disruptions for children and increase the stress in the care giving family. Separation due to the incarceration of a parent is also likely to cause trauma. This is especially true if children are present at the arrest of their parent, if there are multiple placements with family or foster care and if the arrest and incarceration create major changes in the child's everyday life.

Enduring trauma occurs most often when the parental incarceration is only a part of an ongoing history of violence, inconsistent parental availability, abuse, addictions, chaos and repeated loss.

The loss of a parent to incarceration will often create major life disruptions. Changes in economic status, caregiver employment, and changes in residence, schools and community can strip children of what is familiar and comforting in the context of distress. These disruptions often combine with a "conspiracy of silence" that so often is required in families of prisoners, and subjects children of incarcerated parents to acute traumatic stress reactions.

Social stigma and new surroundings keep children from talking to peers. Well-intentioned caregivers who attempt to distract and protect children from distress, will avoid conversations about the trauma and limit the availability of counseling. All of this leaves children to cope with PTSD symptoms and inadequate support to overcome the effects of the trauma.

### **Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

- Reduced involvement with peers and activities
- Numbness of responsiveness
- Constriction of emotion
- Dissociative states
- Foreshortened view of the future
- Flashbacks or intrusive recollections of the traumatic event
- Reenactment of the trauma through words or play
- Avoidance of traumatic cues (things or people that are reminders of the events)
- Lack of concentration
- Hyperarousal, hyperalertness
- Sleep disturbances
- Distractibility

From "Silent Victims: Children Who Witness Violence,"<sup>6</sup>

### **Facts about the Crime and Sentence**

The stigma of a parent's arrest will vary with the type of crime charged and the child's social context. If a parent is charged with a sexual crime, for example, a child will be subjected to intense feelings arising from the stigma attached to the crimes of rape or sexual abuse. For teens this may also be complicated by their emerging sexuality.

If there is suspected injustice related to racism, politics or police brutality and family and community rally around the incarcerated parent, children may join in and view the parent as an innocent victim even if they are guilty of the crime. For school aged children this can also challenge their developing sense of right and wrong. If racism and injustice are also a part of everyday life, children and adults may be at higher risk for depression.

The length of sentence will also affect how a child copes with a parent's incarceration, as will the explanations given to them and the motivation of caregivers to maintain the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent over time. In some families, a sentence of two years may seem like too long a time to keep a child connected to a parent. In others, it will be perceived as too short to go through the aggravation... "He will be out before we know it."

The impact of the length of sentence will also be affected by the nature of the crime, previous incarcerations and the child's developmental capacity for understanding time.

### **Outside Supports**

Protective factors are outside supports that ease a child's distress, buffer them from risk and increase their capacity for survival. Those supports can be financial, social or emotional. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and other family and friends are most likely to buffer children of inmates. Teachers and others in the community can also play a powerful role in supplying a child with some of the needs that aren't being met by the incarcerated parent.

Stories from children of prisoners tell how relationships made a positive difference - protecting them from risk.

*The crossing guard...he gave me a banana every morning and took me for haircuts and asked to see my report cards. If I got into trouble he would be upset with me ...I trusted him.*

*A school counselor...I went to see her once a week and all we talked about was hair and nails but I wouldn't miss those appointments for anything...She also told me I was smart.*

*A nurse at the clinic... taught me to tie my shoes and to whistle and every time I saw her she acted really glad to see me.*

*My third foster mother. She told me that no matter how many times I got into trouble, she would not give up on me.*

*The librarian that found me books that had kids with a parent in jail.*

Awareness of children's varying reactions to parental incarceration can increase the capacity of professionals and family members to protect children of prisoners from risk.

*Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.*

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### **About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)**

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