

# **FOSTER PARENTS AND CHILDREN WITH AN INCARCERATED PARENT**

by

**Judi Goozh and Sue Jeweler**

Foster parents help children heal by giving them a safe place to live and grow. They offer stability, supervision, guidance, nurturing, and support to children as they face their personal challenges. Did you know that about 15-20% of children entering the child welfare system have an incarcerated parent and many of these children have placements in foster care? As a matter of fact, parental incarceration was a reason for entry into foster care for 19,858 children in 2013. In Montgomery County, of the 390 children who entered foster care in one year, 7% had a parent incarcerated at the time of removal.

Incarceration of a parent followed by the removal of a child from a home is not a single event, but rather a process that unfolds over time. In addition, there are both short term and long term effects. There are also differences depending upon which parent is incarcerated as to how a child reacts. However, there are several similarities between a child who enters foster care due to a traumatic home situation and children who have an incarcerated parent. In both situations, children seem to suffer shame, confusion, and sadness. Research shows that children in either circumstance are often impacted socially (acting out behaviors, friendship problems, communication), emotionally (depression, anger, confusion, feelings of abandonment), and academically (attention, concentration, learning issues, poor grades). They often feel loneliness, fear, guilt, and frustration. Understanding the impact of incarceration on children in particular can be beneficial to foster parents as they work with this often underserved and invisible population.

## **Impact on the Family**

Many of the families of children with an incarcerated parent are impacted by social stigma, the loss of income, and the loss of the family home which may account for why they end up in foster care. Prior to even entering a foster home, children have suffered emotionally.

There is often confusion as to what to tell a child about where the parent is, or even if they should be told. Research indicates that if children are told about the incarceration in an age appropriate manner and in an open and honest way, they were more likely to react with loneliness than with anger.

## **Impact on School**

Despite whatever happens at home, school-aged children daily return to their classrooms and are burdened by their family experiences. Young children tend to withdraw and show anxiety, anger or hostility towards caregivers. Older children often exhibit school difficulties and problems with peers.

Unless the social worker or caseworker tells the school that a family member is incarcerated, the only way the school knows would be through overhearing other kids or the child telling the teacher or at a school meeting designed to provide services to at-risk children. Both the social worker and the foster parent can, should, and ideally would attend school meetings. In many ways, this is a difficult, double issue for the child - being in foster care and having an incarcerated parent.

### **Impact of Prison Visits and Children**

Foster parents might be court ordered to take the child to visit the parent in jail or prison. In other cases, visitation is done by the social worker. Talking to the social worker for advice and assistance may be very helpful for the foster parent as there are many things to consider.

For example, one of the ways to lessen the negative impact of incarceration is to maintain family ties during the incarceration. Without the visits, the children may believe the parent no longer loves them or cares about them. Research says that visiting increases the likelihood that the relationship will survive when the parent is released.

On the other hand, others feel visiting a parent in jail is too traumatic. If the prison visit involves long distance traveling, this may not be a good idea. Some people feel that part of the punishment for the parent should be their inability to see their children. Most research supports visitation as a good thing and improved the ability of the child to have a positive feeling about the parent. The decisions need to be made with the expertise of the social worker in deciding the benefit vs. the risk to the child.

Visiting an incarcerated parent may be very difficult for children. Children are often nervous. If the child is worried about talking to the parent, prior to the visit, the foster parent could help the child find other ways to engage the parent. For example, the child could bring a written letter or a drawing for the parent. Saying goodbye may also be very difficult for the child. Giving the child 5 minute and 10 minute warnings before the end of the visit can allow the child to start mentally preparing to leave.

Children react in different ways to visiting. Immediately following a visit, children may be sad, tired, and tearful or engage in aggressive behavior. It is important for children to be able to express their feelings about the visit. Foster parents and other individuals can be a great support system. There may be programs or resources that can help the child through this time. Ask the social worker if there are mentoring programs or other resources that can be of assistance to the child.

### **Reunification**

A recent analysis from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting system indicated that there was no significant difference in the rate of reunification between a child in foster care whose parents were incarcerated and a child in foster care whose parents were not incarcerated. There are so many factors that need to be

considered but children need regular contact, the parent needs to participate with the caseworkers in guidance, and the parent needs access to services to help them with mental health or substance abuse issues.

### **What Can You Do?**

- Re-think our own preconceived ideas and stereotypical attitudes about crime, the incarcerated parent, the family, and the idea that the child now will probably follow in this downward path.
- Educate others.
- Be compassionate. Help break the cycle – do not assume nothing can be done.
- Give appropriate support during the initial period of adjustment, the incarceration, and throughout the process of reunification.
- If appropriate, prompt open discussions with the child in a safe, caring, and confidential way and encourage the child to talk about their experiences to deal with their emotions that follow incarceration.
- As a foster parent, work with a social worker as a team. But that being said, whoever goes to the school for the meetings, needs to be sure that this information is given to the school. These kids often have the same social, emotional or behavioral problems at school as they do at home. Therefore, unless they have been told, the teachers are in the dark which makes providing the appropriate services and treatment for the child more difficult.

We hope that foster parents who have children with an incarcerated parent under their care will find the information in this article helpful. If they do not directly provide care for these children, they may know someone - whether it is a relative, a neighbor, a distant friend, a fellow foster parent or an acquaintance - who has a child with an incarcerated parent. By sharing this information, foster parents can be "agents of change" as they educate others about this powerful issue.

---

### **Resources:**

- Sesame Street's new *Little Children, Big Challenges* program is a series of online tool kits for children and their parents dealing with adversity. Issues include not just prison, but also bullying, divorce and relocation. [The tool kit](http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration) contains videos, activities and handouts offering advice, encouragement and games for when they visit Mom or Dad in jail.  
<http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration>
- **"Echoes of Incarceration"**  
This film, produced by teens with incarcerated parents, intercuts the stories of

four young people with the voices of experts and advocates in the field, and creates an emotional, compelling case for the importance of ongoing parental contact. The DVD has been shown in prisons, universities, trainings around the country, with highly enthusiastic feedback wherever it's been shown.

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



## CREATIVE FAMILY PROJECTS, LLC

Thinking Outside the Box



VISIT OUR WEBSITE

<http://www.creativefamilyprojects.org>

### HELPFUL HINTS FOR CHILDREN WITH AN INCARCERATED PARENT

- **Talk to the child's social worker about the impact of your situation if your child is showing signs of acting out or unhappiness.**
- **When you talk to your child:**
  - **Be honest.**
  - **Be calm. Model self-control.**
  - **Be patient.**
  - **Be consistent about rules.**
  - **Encourage your child to express anger by using words.**
  - **Use "I Messages".**
- **When your child talks to you:**
  - **Listen.**
  - **Use a parroting technique.**
  - **Re-state what the child says.**
  - **Be aware of your body language:**
    - **Make eye contact.**
    - **Be aware of your facial expressions.**
  - **Keep an open-mind.**
- **Find positive outlets for your frustration.**
- **Find healthy outlets for you and your child.**
- **Keep a journal. Record child's behavior before and after visit. Also, write other triggers for behavioral outbursts.**
- **Foster a positive relationship between your child and the incarcerated parent.**
- **Help others.**