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## **Educators Educating Others About Children with an Incarcerated Parent Within the Jewish Community**

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by **Judi Goozh and Sue Jeweler**

- Did you know that on any given day, more than 7 million children have a parent in prison or jail or under parole or probation supervision and that 1.7 % are Jewish?
- Did you know that, although we hear about high profile criminals, Jews are so assimilated in our society they commit the same offenses in proportion to the general population – including drugs, addictions, robbery, murder, and sex crimes?
- Did you know that, if a Jewish mom or dad has children, the family faces shame, humiliation, economic distress, and stress? As a result, the children frequently exhibit behaviors at home, at secular school, religious school, and in camps ranging from depression, anxiety, and withdrawal to anger, defiance, and aggression.
- Did you know that, as a group, the children are reluctant to express their feelings and often hide the family secret?

Historically, this issue has been silent in the Jewish community as it was considered a “shonda” to have a person in a congregation who was incarcerated.

Eight years ago, as secular educators (who are also Jewish) with 76 years of combined experience, we found a gap in the system in recognizing the needs of children with an incarcerated parent. As a result, we created a 16-page booklet called, *Mommies and Daddies in Jail*, in both English and Spanish, that is directed at children with an incarcerated parent and those individuals who touch their lives. It addresses the questions and concerns felt by these children through the story of a child who witnesses the arrest of a parent, and includes questions that are asked by the child and answered throughout the process from arrest to incarceration. It is designed to be offered as a free publication.

### **How can you help?**

The Jewish community values education as an investment in the future, is at the vanguard of social action and, through *tikkun olam*, works to repair the world.

- Start a conversation with your colleagues and friends about this issue.
- Rethink 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.
- Make sure that children who have an incarcerated parent are properly assessed and supported.
- Prompt open discussions with either the parent or the child in a safe, caring, and confidential way and having the child or parent talk about their experiences, and helping them to deal with the emotions and consequences that follow their parent's incarceration reduces the problematic symptoms children often experience.
- Early introduction of appropriate diagnosis and intervention are the key to effective treatment for these at risk kids. Children who received appropriate support during the initial period of adjustment to parent incarceration are less likely to experience the effects of long term stress, anxiety, and depression.
- As teachers, understand the impact on the family and what kinds of things to say to be helpful.
- Encourage cross-collaboration among social service providers, within the school, and agencies recommended to parents for other help.
- Educate others in our field so that they do not judge the child and assume he/she will also end up in jail someday.

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