

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN WITH AN INCARCERATED PARENT

Children who have an incarcerated parent feel the same level of trauma as children who have had a parent die or whose parents divorced. The children may exhibit aggression, defiance, disobedience, depression, anxiety and/or withdrawal. Younger children may show withdrawal and anger, especially to the person taking care of them.

If there are many other losses such as losing the income of the other parent, changing homes, losing friends, having to move, having to live with a grandparent or another relative, then the child may experience even more behavior issues. Even if the child stays with the other parent, he or she may have to cope with social stigma, stress in the family and, often, feelings of shame.

Sometimes the parent or caregiver is so overwhelmed with all of the issues they have to deal with, that often the children's needs are ignored.

School-aged children may have additional problems with school work and issues with their peers. They may be very reluctant to discuss their feelings and often maintain a facade that everything is okay. These same children may experience low self-esteem.

Research shows that school professionals can be critical in making sure that children who have an incarcerated parent are properly assessed and supported.

The following strategies may be helpful to the adult who spends time with a child who is impacted by the incarceration of a parent. Use this list personally or share it with someone who could benefit from the ideas.

- **Ask open-ended questions to try to engage your child in a dialogue. Some examples are:**
 - **Is it hard not to have Mommy or Daddy home? How does it make you feel?**
 - **You must have some worries - do you want to share them? What worries you?**
 - **Has anyone at school asked you about your Mom or Dad? What did you say?**

- **When your child talks to you:**
 - **Try to be a good listener.**
 - **Parrot back what your child says. For example:**
 - Child: I feel scared at night.**
 - Parent or Caregiver: I wonder what you are scared about.**
 - **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.**
- **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". For example:**
 - **Not an "I Message": You never clean up after yourself.**
 - **An "I Message": I get upset and frustrated when I pick up your toys after you play with them.**
- **Tell the school about what is happening to you and your family.**

(Talk to the counselor, teacher, principal, speech and language pathologist, special education teacher or case manager, or any staff member with whom you are comfortable.)
- **Talk to a staff member about the impact of your situation if your child is showing signs of acting out or unhappiness.**
- **Talk to your family doctor or someone at your clinic or urgent care facility.**
- **Contact agencies or organizations for help.**
- **Find positive outlets for your frustration.**
- **Find healthy outlets for you and your child.**
- **Keep a journal.**
- **Foster a positive relationship between your child and the incarcerated parent.**
- **Help others.**

For further information or comments and suggestions, feel free to contact us through this website!