

## Incarceration: What About the Children?

“I love my father and I forgive him. No matter what he did or didn’t do, he is still my father. Maybe he did what they said; maybe not. But I have forgiven him. It’s hard to go visit my father because I can’t take leaving him behind those bars. I just wish that I could bring him home with me. I want to be held by him so bad and hear him tell me everything’s alright. That’s what I miss most. People don’t understand that no matter what he did, to me he’s still my father” (Katrina, 2009).

When most of us think about traumatic grief and loss, we think about the loss of a loved one due to an unexpected and/or violent death. When we think about bad things that happen to children, we also think about child abuse and/or neglect. Felitti and Anda (1998) broadened our prospective about childhood trauma in the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. Felitti and Anda surveyed over 17,000 patients to ask about abuse and household dysfunction prior to age 18. The ACE survey included child abuse and neglect, as well as household dysfunction, which included domestic violence, substance abuse of a parent, mental illness of a parent, and incarceration of a parent.

Incarceration is something gossiped about in the community and/or whispered among close family members. According to 2007 Bureau of Justice statistics 1.7 million children in the United States have a parent in prison. Each year thousands of children experience the emotional and physical turmoil of losing a parent to incarceration. Moreover, incarceration is often preceded by a period of family instability, poverty, child abuse and/or neglect, marital conflict, and an absent parent, followed by relocation and placement. In addition to coping with feelings of grief, loss, shame, anger, and rejection, many children deal with the stigma associated with imprisonment. The losses experienced by children with an incarcerated parent (s) are frequently overlooked in the school, the neighborhood and in the community. The child’s loss is often masked by other symptoms such as school refusal, academic failure, dropping out, social isolation, emotional withdrawal, involvement with the legal system, substance abuse, aggression, hostility, and other behavioral and emotional issues. Not only is the loss of the parent due to incarceration and the associated stigma difficult for the child, as are the developmental consequences, circumstances of the arrest, lack of visitation due to distance and impoverished family resources.

How can this tremendous loss be diminished for the child? Firstly, caring and supportive relationships with extended family and non-family social networks helps to foster resilience. Secondly, honest, respectful, and developmentally appropriate explanations for the absence of a parent, helps decrease the child’s feelings of anger, hostility, abandonment, and anxiety. Thirdly, regularly scheduled visitation with the incarcerated parent can reduce feelings of anger, abandonment and guilt and increase feelings of predictability, safety, attachment, and well being. Lastly, informed professionals in the health and mental health care fields, education, child welfare, and the criminal justice fields can make the transition easier for the child. References are available upon request.

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