



Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Tip Sheet for Educators and School Staff

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More than 10 million children in the United States have endured the traumatic experience of parental incarceration or have a parent under correctional supervision, with Black and Hispanic children being disproportionately impacted. Parental incarceration has been identified as an adverse childhood experience that has the potential to negatively impact a child's social, educational, psychological, and emotional development. These negative outcomes are often due to the multitude of stressors that cause significant disruption and distress such as relocation to a new school or community, adjusting to new caretakers, financial strain, and exposure to the parent's arrest. Those experiences become even more distressing with the compounded sense of shame, stigma, and loss that children of incarcerated parents often feel. School staff can play a significant role in creating a safe and supportive school environment for children impacted by incarceration. While every student's experience with incarceration is unique, here are a few tips for school staff that can help.

Talk about it



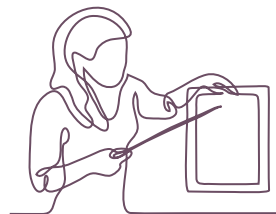
Find opportunities to discuss incarceration and bring awareness to systemic injustices such as disparate sentencing and incarceration rates in the United States. Far too often, the voices of children impacted by incarceration are silenced because of shame or discomfort on behalf of the adults around them. It is up to us, as adults, to create safe spaces for children to discuss their concerns and challenges.

Have positive expectations

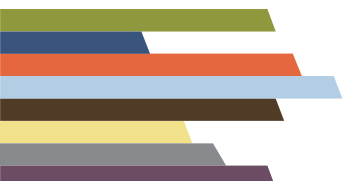


Children of incarcerated parents are often negatively judged by others. People sometimes assume that simply because a child's parent is incarcerated that the child is destined for a negative trajectory. While it can be a stressful and traumatic experience to have a parent in jail or prison, many children of incarcerated parents are resilient, successful in school, and have a multitude of strengths that they can rely on to help them cope.

Use humanizing language



It is unfortunately far too common to hear dehumanizing terms, such as convict, prisoner, or felon to refer to people who are incarcerated. These labels marginalize and stereotype people and fail to recognize the full identity of those who have been incarcerated. Utilizing more appropriate terms such as person with justice system involvement or returning citizens, can help reduce the stigma of incarceration.





Identify opportunities to engage incarcerated parents



Just because a parent is incarcerated does not mean they are unable to be involved in their student's education. When it is safe to do so, work with the student's caretaker to see if it is possible to provide educational updates to the parent who is incarcerated. Be creative and think outside the box to determine how to keep everyone who is an important part of the student's life engaged.

Be aware of trauma triggers



There may be particular events that trigger an emotional reaction in students with incarcerated parents. For instance, Mother's Day, Father's Day, a school assignment focused on family members, or getting a permission slip signed can be distressing for some students. It is important to be prepared for these difficult days and ensure that the student is provided with support, and not shame, as they cope with these reminders.

Offer support



Find ways to let children impacted by incarceration know that they are not alone. Consider having books about incarceration in your classroom, offer a support group, or identify community-based supports that are available. It is important for impacted youth to have opportunities to connect with peers who have similar experiences to help decrease feelings of shame and isolation.

Examine school policies and procedures



Examine your school policies and procedures to determine if they are trauma-informed. For example, are excused absences allowed on days that students visit their parent in jail or prison? What school-based services are in place for students who need emotional support? Does your school provide free uniforms or a food pantry for families who may be experiencing economic strain? Ensuring that trauma-informed school policies and procedures are in place is one critical way to provide the care and support that children of incarcerated parents need.

Resources

- National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
- National Institute of Corrections: Children of Incarcerated Parents
- The Osborne Association

About the Author: Dr. Dana Cunningham is a Licensed Psychologist and author of *A Day I'll Never Forget*, which she wrote to help support children who are impacted by the incarceration of a loved one.

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