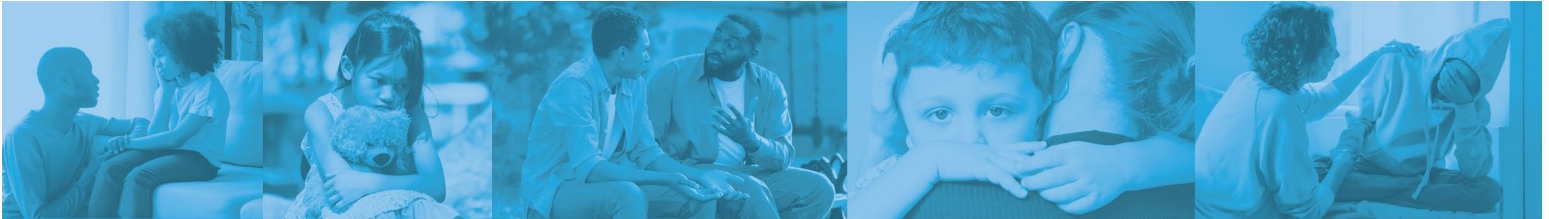




Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Tip Sheet for Parents and Caregivers

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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. Many youth report increased feelings of sadness, anger, worry, and stress as they cope with the incarceration of their parent. Unfortunately, many of them suffer in silence because of the shame and stigma that often accompany their experiences. Despite those challenges, with the love and support of their family, children of incarcerated parents can thrive. Although every child will have a different experience with the incarceration of their parent, here are a few tips that can help.

Talk about it



Find opportunities to help your child express their thoughts and feelings about the incarceration. While many caregivers have a desire to protect children, it is important to tell them the truth about the incarceration in a manner that they can understand. Being dishonest about a parent's incarceration can lead a child to make up their own stories about a parent's disappearance or create more problems when they discover the truth. It is up to us, as adults, to create safe spaces for children to discuss their concerns and challenges.

Monitor your child's reaction to the incarceration



Some children may exhibit changes in their mood, behavior, or school performance such as a depressed mood, increased anger, or a decline in grades as they cope with the separation from their parent. Some changes in behavior may occur immediately after the incarceration, while other changes may be observed months or years thereafter. It is important to remain aware of any significant changes in your child that could be signs of emotional distress. If you notice anything that is concerning, be sure to contact a mental health professional to obtain additional support.

Identify supportive networks



Find ways to let your child know that they are not alone. Try to identify programs in your community or school to provide your child with opportunities to connect with peers who have similar experiences to help decrease feelings of shame and isolation. A strong support system is one of the most important protective factors that can help decrease the risks associated with parental incarceration.

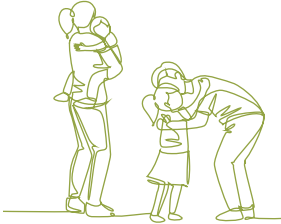


Communicate with your child's school



Some caregivers may find it helpful to let the school know that a parent is incarcerated, and others may not feel safe to do so. The decision to share that information is a personal one and is easier to do if there is a staff member at the school that you trust. If you don't decide to share information about the incarceration, it can be helpful to let the school know that your child may need some extra support.

Support contact with the incarcerated parent



When it is safe to do so, supporting a child in maintaining a relationship with their incarcerated parent can be beneficial not only for the child, but also for the parent. Contact during a parent's incarceration can help to maintain the parent-child relationship, contribute to positive adjustment in the child, and reduce recidivism rates. If visiting in person is not an option, encourage letter writing or sending photos to stay connected. Many children express feelings of gratitude for being able to remain connected with their incarcerated parent.

Prepare children for visits



Visiting a parent in prison can be a scary and uncomfortable experience for many children. Help the child get ready for the visit by discussing what to expect when they get there. Discussing with them in advance about the security protocols, the presence of guards, and the length of the visit can be helpful.

Take care of yourself



Many parents may experience feelings of helplessness, worry, or feel overwhelmed at times. It can be helpful for your child to see you coping with these stressful events in a healthy way as they will take their cues from you. Being the caretaker of a child with an incarcerated parent can be very stressful and it may be helpful to discuss your experiences with other caretakers who are enduring similar experiences or a licensed mental health professional.

Resources

- National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
- National Institute of Corrections: Children of Incarcerated Parents
- The Osborne Association
- Sesame Street: Coping with Incarceration

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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