

White Paper: Helping Students with Incarcerated Parents

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“I am thankful that my daughter is in this Girl Scout program, not just because I get to see her once a month, but because Girl Scouts is giving her skills she needs so that she does not follow the same path I took that got me in jail.” Girl Scouts of Hawai’i’s Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (Soltes, 2012)

Why am I interested in helping students with incarcerated parents? Because the percentage of students in my current school's population who have had or currently have an incarcerated parent is exceptionally high, over 35%. I also have had two negative experiences on days when students whose incarcerated parent was released from jail, so I would like to help teachers and school administrators understand how they can help the families of students who have parents who are behind bars. I am interested in helping families find a path to move forward.

After reading a variety of research, I have come to three conclusions: one, the person who is currently caring for the child will have the biggest impact on their well-being; two, students have the best mental health and academic success when they are able to maintain a strong relationship with a confined parent which also helps the incarcerated parent; and three, it takes a team and is not something one teacher, caregiver, counselor, or parent can do alone.

Incarcerated parents who connect with their children promote better outcomes for both parent and child. There are multiple ways children can keep in contact with their incarcerated parent and develop a strong relationship. Visitations can be stressful for families and children.

They can cause financial burdens depending on the distance to jail or prison and take away much-needed funds that should be going to a child's basic physical and mental needs, cause confusion to the child depending on how child-friendly the institution is, and create emotional wounds unless the caregiver is able to provide intense support before and after the visit. There are other ways contact can be continued through written letters and/or phone calls that are less stressful and expensive.

There are visitation differences between parents incarcerated in jail versus prison. Some of the differences include being able to physically touch or hug an inmate in prison, whereas in jail family members are usually petitioned behind glass and only the person holding the phone can hear what the inmate is saying. Jails tend to be closer to families so visits are more likely, they also hold inmates for shorter periods of time. Prisons tend to be a longer distance making visits more problematic and costly, and tend to be for longer periods of at least a year. One 10-week study “found that children’s self-esteem increased” (Landreth and Lobaugh, 1998) when fathers were able to have physical contact with their families in a child-friendly environment.

Children can send parents notecards and letters, artwork or cartoons, or report cards, awards, and papers from school. They can share about a book they are reading, and possibly the parent can get it from the library in prison or jail. A program called Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG) enables inmates to create a recording of them reading a book to their child, including a personal message (Kaiper-Marquez, et al, 2023). With permission from the caregiver, each child in the household receives a unique copy of a book and a recording made personally for them.

Children can feel abandoned, depressed, or angry with their incarcerated parent. Even if their current caregiver does not want them to receive the letters when they are young, if the parent writes them and stores the letters, it can help mend barriers when the child is older and independent. Sometimes it is easier for a parent to explain why they are serving a “time-out” to their child in a letter instead of meeting them face-to-face in a potentially embarrassing visitation setting. What is most important is that the child knows that they were thought of and cared for while the parent is confined. If the caregiver is willing to continue the relationship, they can help by reminding the parent of birthdays or the child’s interests, events at school, or the child’s thoughts and feelings. “The family is probably this country's most valuable weapon in fighting crime. Prisoners who receive visitors, maintain family ties, and are released to a stable home environment are more likely to succeed in leading productive, crime-free lives.” (NRCCFI, n.d.)

One of the most important things caregivers can do is be honest with the child about their parent's incarceration. Children frequently imagine their parent’s condition and circumstances to be far worse than they actually are, so reassuring the child that their parent is in a safe place where they receive meals, exercise, and have a place to sleep is essential. Children also tend to blame themselves for their parent’s incarceration, so it is crucial that caregivers explain to them that their parent made a mistake and are repaying their debt to society responsibly, relieving the child of feelings of shame and guilt, especially since children are usually confused about their own thoughts and can be fearful or unable to vocalize them clearly.

Because the children are ashamed of their situation and do not want to talk about it with family members, friends, teachers and/or counselors at school, they often do not receive the support and help they need. They also tend to have double the number of absences. Children with

incarcerated parents tend to have trust issues on personal and public levels, tend to be disengaged from society, and suffer from financial difficulties as well as anxiety about the future. Without proper support, students are likely to follow in their parent's footsteps and end up homeless or in prison when they are adults. Having a caregiver who advocates for their well-being, keeps a structured schedule, and helps them maintain a relationship with their parent, is essential for student success.

Teachers and counselors at school can provide guidance, an open ear, and a safe learning environment for children whose parents are behind bars. They can help students feel confident and reduce the stigma and embarrassment, when questions like 'Where's your mom?' or 'How come your dad's never around?' come up. Teachers and counselors dealing with these student populations should receive professional training specifically for helping students with incarcerated parents.

Helping parents and students stay connected, is something a teacher or school can do for children with the caregiver's permission, after all, when they grow up and graduate, they are going to be part of the overall community. School intervention programs geared towards helping staff understand student struggles, confidentiality, and home situations can benefit students as well.

In conclusion, children with parents behind bars need caregivers who make sure they get the mental and physical supports that they need. If it is possible for them to develop positive connections and consistent contact with their incarcerated parents, including visitations, phone calls, and letters, this can have benefits for the entire family. More often than not, children will be reunited with their parents after incarceration, so keeping these bonds alive is critical for the

family's future success. Children need consistent structure in their lives, loving caring adult role models, and hope for a stable, secure future.

My solution to the problem includes making sure my students are successful in school so they see themselves as contributing members of society who are confident in their ability to make a living wage and provide for their future and dreams without the need to resort to criminal activity. Helping my current students retain connection with their incarcerated parents, and helping them receive proper support so they do not blame themselves or feel the stigma of having a parent in jail is crucial for my current students in this very small town where everyone thinks they know everyone else business. Making sure they have a safe learning environment where they feel consistent structure and have dependable role models who understand what they are going through is key to easing their childhoods. Sharing this information with other teachers, parents, and administrators so they are not blindsided as I have been in the past is another part of my solution.

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