

Reaching Out

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

SPRING 2008



Out of the Shadows: What Child Welfare Workers Can Do to Help Children and their Incarcerated Parents

By Susan Brooks, Director, Northern California Training Academy, The Center for Human Services, UC Davis Extension

The Northern California Training Academy sponsored a symposium on children of incarcerated parents where I learned a surprising child welfare statistic: An estimated 10-20 percent of children in foster care in California have a parent who is currently incarcerated. What do we know about these families? We know that maternal incarceration is most likely to impact children going into foster care. We know that 43 percent of women are incarcerated for drug-related offenses. We also know from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that poverty plays an integral role in increasing both parental incarceration and placement of children in foster care. In the month before arrest, 54 percent of all parents incarcerated in state prison reported monthly incomes below \$1,000.

Nell Bernstein, in her introduction to the 2006 report, "Rebuilding Families, Reclaiming Lives: State Obligations to Children in Foster Care and Their Incarcerated Parents," describes families involved with both criminal and child welfare law as being swept into a Bermuda Triangle. While both systems are concerned with safety, in many fundamental ways they are at odds with each other, and these families pay the price.

For example, the Adoptions and Safe Families Act (AFSA) of 1997 tightened time frames for making permanency plans to keep children from languishing in foster care. Incarcerated parents frequently have sentences longer than AFSA timeframes, so the unintended result has been the disproportionate termination of parental rights for incarcerated parents.

Child welfare has mandated responsibilities to families in which children are in foster care and a parent is incarcerated. Children have the right to regular contact with their incarcerated parents, and incarcerated parents have the right to continue to parent their children, yet accommodating these rights can be a real challenge for child welfare workers and foster parents. While there is no simple solution for helping these families, it's time to bring them out of the shadows and listen to what they need.

This issue of Reaching Out is dedicated to providing information to help child welfare workers better understand and address this difficult issue.

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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA
Training Academy
Supporting Children & Family Services

The Center
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Map of California's Correctional and Rehabilitation Facilities

A Different Way of Thinking

"The impulse to simply write off families with parents in prison and children in foster care is strong. After all, both the criminal justice and child welfare systems are systems of last resort—places where people end up when something in their lives or families has gone terribly wrong. So the thinking goes, parents who break the law cannot possibly be good mothers or fathers, and their children are better off without them; the best thing society can do for children with the misfortune of being born to parents who end up in prison is remove them from those parents and find them better ones. As instinctive as this impulse may be, it is flawed. Parents who break the law can still be good, attentive and supportive parents. And children with an incarcerated parent may be better off if allowed to build or maintain a strong relationship with that parent instead of being directed to move on and bond with a new family."

—Bernstein N., *Rebuilding Families, Reclaiming Lives: State Obligations to Children in Foster Care and Their Incarcerated Parents*. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, 2006.

"Because I didn't have that permanent separation—I always had contact in some form, whether it was writing or phone calls or visits, with my mother—I understand the strength of a family. When it's hard times, you stick together. And that was just a hard time."

—Source: *Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights*; San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership




● Adult Institutions

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Pelican Bay State Prison | 18. Pleasant Valley State Prison |
| 2. High Desert State Prison | 19. Avenal State Prison |
| 3. California Correctional Center | 20. California Men's Colony |
| 4. Folsom State Prison | 21. North Kern State Prison |
| 5. CSP Sacramento (New Folsom) | 22. Kern Valley State Prison |
| 6. Mule Creek State Prison | 23. Wasco State Prison |
| 7. California Medical Facility | 24. California Correctional Institution |
| 8. CSP Solano | 25. CSP Los Angeles County |
| 9. CSP San Quentin | 26. California Institution for Men |
| 10. Sierra Conservation Center | 27. California Institution for Women |
| 11. Deuel Vocational Institution | 28. California Rehabilitation Center |
| 12. Valley State Prison for Women | 29. Ironwood State Prison |
| 13. Central California Women's Facility | 30. Chuckawalla Valley State Prison |
| 14. Correctional Training Facility | 31. Calipatria State Prison |
| 15. Salinas Valley State Prison | 32. Centinela State Prison |
| 16. CSP Corcoran | 33. Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility |
| 17. Substance Abuse Treatment Facility and State Prison | |

◆ Juvenile Institutions

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Preston Youth Correctional Facility | 5. El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility |
| 2. O.H. Close Youth Correctional Facility | 6. Ventura Youth Correctional Facility |
| 3. DeWitt Nelson Youth Correctional Facility | 7. Southern Youth Correctional Reception Center-Clinic |
| 4. N.A. Chaderjian Youth Correctional Facility | 8. Heman G. Stark Youth Correctional Facility |



“It will just upset the child to see his parent in jail.”

“She’s a drug addict.”

“He should have thought of his kids before he committed the crime.”

“Prisons are scary, dangerous places for children.”

Why is Visitation Important?

These are some of the reactions child welfare staff have to child visitation when a parent is incarcerated. Setting up visitation between a child and a parent in jail or prison is not easy, but the bottom line is that it is necessary and important. There are several reasons why visitation is beneficial for both children and their incarcerated parents.

- Most literature suggests that separation due to incarceration has immediate effects on children such as feelings of guilt and shame, fear of abandonment and loss of financial support. Long-term effects of separation can range from maturation regression to impaired ability to cope with future stress or trauma. Visitation can substantially decrease the negative impacts of incarceration.
- Contact visitation—meaning the child can touch his/her parent—helps maintain the parent/child bond. This bond is essential for healthy child development and is a protective factor for adolescents.
- Maintaining a connection with a parent helps children cope with a parent’s incarceration. Visitation helps normalize the interaction between parent and child and benefits children emotionally and behaviorally.
- Parent/child visitation has a major impact on parents’ rate of recidivism. Parents who have regular contact with their children while incarcerated are much less likely to commit another crime. Repeated parental incarceration raises the likelihood

that the children will also commit crimes that result in incarceration. Thus, if visitation prevents recidivism of the parent, it may also help prevent his/her child from committing future crimes.

- Maintaining contact with their children helps parents maintain their parental rights. The Adoptions and Safe Families Act of 1997 states that a child who has lived in foster care for 15 of the previous 22 months needs to be evaluated by child welfare for permanency. In these situations, in order to retain parental rights, a strong and continued bond with the child must be proved. Visitation helps maintain this bond.
- Regular parent/child visitation during a parent’s incarceration helps family reunification when the parent is released. The stronger and more current an incarcerated parent’s relationship with his/her children, the smoother the parent’s reintegration into the family.
- It’s the law. It’s not a choice. Unless the court has determined that visiting the parent will put the child in danger, children and incarcerated parents have the right to regular, ongoing visits.

Child welfare workers need to set aside their prejudices about children’s regular visitation with an incarcerated parent and educate themselves regarding the benefits and what they can do to support children and parents in this situation.

Information in this article is excerpted and adapted from: Children of Prisoners Library Pamphlet # 102 and “Child Protection Best Practices Bulletin: Connecting Children with Incarcerated Parents.” Corinne Wolfe Children’s Law Center.

In their Own Words...

“What would have helped me is talking about it. When you don’t know where your mom is, it’s really scary for a child. And no one was talking about it. Just, ‘Here’s a placement for you until she gets herself together.’ You don’t know when she’s coming to pick you up—if she is ever going to come.”

Rochelle, 25

“One foster home I was in, I called the lady there my grandmother, ‘cause she took care of me. She always made sure that I got in touch with my mom. Even if my mom was locked up and tryin’ to call collect, she could call there. My grandmother knew that mattered in my life.”

Antonio, 23

“[During the three-hour visits,] I remember her pushing me on a swing. Me showing her my muscles, even though I didn’t have any. Just me being relaxed and having fun with my mother is what I remember most... I couldn’t even begin to express to you in words how fulfilling that was to my soul to give my mother a hug. For her to give me a kiss. For me to sit in her lap.”

Malcolm, 17

“When I was five, my mother’s parental rights were terminated. I wasn’t even allowed to be by her in the courtroom... They picked me up and just took me away. Me screaming and yelling, ‘Mommy, I’m sorry. I won’t be bad again.’”

Ahmad, 21

“What I remember most is just missing [mom] tremendously. On days like my first day of kindergarten or my birthday it was always sad because she couldn’t be there for me. Mother’s Day was the hardest, because I remember buying her flowers, and then my dad telling me that I couldn’t give them to her. It was these little things that affected me the most. Throughout her incarceration, I was fortunate enough to visit her and stay in close touch, but it is important to understand that most people don’t have that. When a parent is taken away from you, there is nothing in the world that can replace them.”

—youth with an incarcerated parent

Helping Children Adjust When a Parent Has Been Incarcerated

Children may have a wide range of feelings when a parent is arrested and incarcerated: anger, shame, sadness, confusion, fear, anxiety, powerlessness, guilt and maybe even relief. The presence and strength of these feelings depends on the child’s age, the child’s relationship with the parent before the arrest and incarceration, the child’s understanding of what happened, whether this is the parent’s first arrest, what the child’s life was like before the arrest, the reactions of others around the child, and what the child’s situation and support have been after the arrest. It is very important to provide children with a non-judgmental, relaxed and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Helping children deal with these feelings is an important part of helping them cope with a parent’s incarceration.

A caretaker’s first job is to reassure children that a) their feelings, whatever they are, are appropriate, and b) they did nothing wrong. Many children, particularly younger ones, may feel guilty—that the parent’s arrest/incarceration is their fault. Children need to know they are not responsible for either their parents’ behavior or the consequences of that behavior. Children also need to know that the incarcerated parent doesn’t blame them and still loves them.

When a parent is arrested and incarcerated, children have a lot of questions about what happened. Adults should truthfully answer children’s questions in a developmentally appropriate way. Even if they don’t ask directly, children want to know: Where is my parent? Why did s/he go away? When will s/he get back? What will happen to me? While it may seem easier and less damaging to make up a story (“Your mom went away to work”), it is not a good idea. Lies undermine a child’s trust, and in these situations, children need to know that they can count on the adults taking care of them to tell them the truth.

Some adults are afraid to talk about an incarcerated parent because they are worried this talk will upset the children. While it is always important to consider how appropriate the content of any conversation is for children to hear, a caretaker should offer children regular opportunities to talk about the incarcerated parent. For children, incarcerated parents are not “out of sight, out of mind.”

Children with an incarcerated parent experience stigma and may be looking for help to deal with shame and embarrassment. Let children know that they are not the only ones with a family member behind bars, and that it’s okay to love their parent who is in jail or prison, even if some people don’t think they should.

Children should be encouraged to reach out to those they trust. Some communities even have support groups for children with incarcerated parents.

Help children stay in regular touch with the incarcerated parent. This can happen through visitation, phone calls or mail. If possible, arrange for face-to-face visits. Help children write letters and send cards or pictures to a parent. If the facility allows it, parents can send recordings of themselves reading a story (See “Read to Me” article on page 9). Anything that allows children and parents to regularly communicate during the parent’s incarceration will help children cope.

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent’s arrest to well after the parent’s release. While these feeling may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (often most strongly during and following visiting), and at the time of release. The caregiver/case worker should see these as particularly vulnerable times and help children process their feelings.

Finally, children may need professional help to deal with feelings that interfere with daily life such as depression or anger management. Find local counseling resources and make sure they have experience working with children with incarcerated parents.

“It is very important to provide children with a non-judgmental, relaxed and safe place to express their feelings, thoughts and beliefs. Helping children deal with these feelings is an important part of helping them cope with a parent’s incarceration.”

The information for this article was excerpted from the following sources: Centerforce: “Tips for Kids Visits” www.centerforce.org; “Practice Notes for North Carolina Child Welfare Workers” Vol. 7, No. 1, January 2002; “Children Visiting Incarcerated Parents” Appendix 4.16; Children of Prisoners Library Pamphlets #103, 105, 202, 204 & 301; and “How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children,” Oregon Department of Corrections, 2001.

Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights

The San Francisco Partnership for Incarcerated Parents (SFPIP) was founded in 2000 with the goal of improving the lives for children of incarcerated parents by increasing awareness of these children, their needs and their strengths. After detailed study of the unique issues children of incarcerated parents face, the SFPIP agreed to use the perspective of the child to communicate these issues to the broader public. As a result, the following bill of rights was developed in 2003. The bill of rights serves as an important reminder that

“[Children of incarcerated parents] have committed no crime, but the penalty they are required to pay is steep. They forfeit, in too many cases, virtually everything that matters to them: their home, their safety, their public status and private self-image, their source of comfort and affection. Their lives and prospects are profoundly affected by the numerous institutions that lay claim to their parents—police, courts, jails and prisons, probation and parole—but they have no rights, explicit or implicit, within any of these jurisdictions.”

Bill of Rights

1. I have the right to be kept safe and informed at the time of my parent’s arrest.
2. I have the right to be heard when decisions are made about me.
3. I have the right to be considered when decisions are made about my parent.
4. I have the right to be well cared for in my parent’s absence.
5. I have the right to speak with, see and touch my parent.
6. I have the right to support as I face my parent’s incarceration.
7. I have the right not to be judged, blamed or labeled because my parent is incarcerated.
8. I have the right to a lifelong relationship with my parent.

Data on California Prisons, Jails, Inmates and their Children

It is difficult to accurately state the number of incarcerated parents and the number of children with parents in jail, prison, or on parole or probation. California does not request or keep family information about arrested or convicted persons. Also, CDSS does not collect data on the number of children in the child welfare system with an incarcerated parent. Available data is often pieced together from smaller research studies and generalized to a larger population, thus, the data presented in this article are merely our best estimates.

California Research Bureau's 2000 report "Children of Incarcerated Parents" states that "An estimated 856,000 children in California have a parent currently involved in California's adult criminal justice system—nearly nine percent of the state's children. We estimate that approximately 195,000 children currently have parents in state prison, 97,000 have parents in jail, and 564,000 children have parents on parole or probation.¹ (See Chart 1 below)

The number of adults being arrested and convicted has grown considerably over time. For example, the number of adults in California sentenced to state correctional institutions rose 20 percent from the years 2000 to 2005 alone.² And, in particular, the proportion of incarcerated females has increased dramatically. (See Table 1)

Impact of incarceration of mothers on children

According to the Women's Prison and Home Association, Inc., "Children of [female] offenders are five times more likely than their peers to end up in prison themselves. One in 10 will have been incarcerated before reaching adulthood."³ Thus, as the number of incarcerated mothers increases, it can have an exponential effect on future incarceration rates.

A 2000 special report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 31 percent of the mothers in prison had been living alone with their children, compared to only four percent of fathers.⁴ This has had a marked increase in the number of children entering the foster care system; however, no organization systematically collects this data.

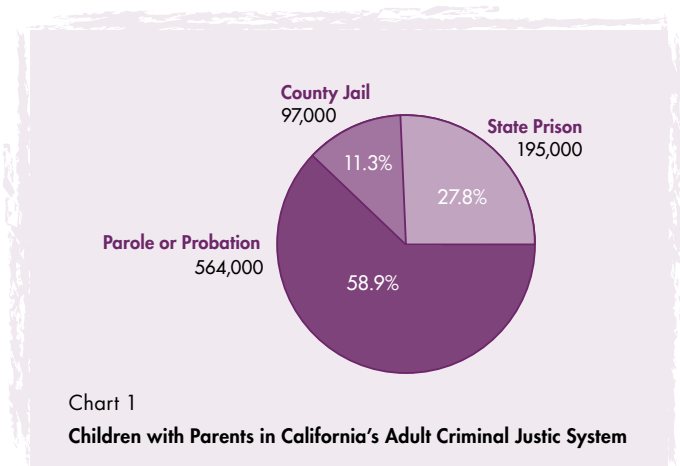


Table 1

Census on U.S. Correctional Populations

Number of adults under correctional supervision and proportion of overall adult population under correctional supervision

Year	Men		Women	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
1987	3,021,000	3.5%	438,6000	.5%
1997	4,797,200	4.9%	895,3000	.9%

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Correctional Surveys (The National Probation Data Survey, National Prisoner Statistics, Survey of Jails, and The National Parole Data Survey) as presented in *Correctional Populations in the United States, 1997*.

Under the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, parental rights can be terminated if a child has been in foster care 15 of the last 22 months. This is problematic because the maximum median sentence for female offenders in state and local prisons in California is 60 months.⁵

Not only are incarcerated mothers subject to timelines that work against them, but their ability to maintain contact with their children while incarcerated is severely limited. More than half of incarcerated mothers do not receive any visits from their children while they are in prison.⁶ The single most significant reason for lack of contact is the children's distance from their mothers' prisons, many of which are located hundreds of miles away from the child. Of the 33 adult state correctional facilities in California, only three of them are for women: The Central California Women's Facility and the Valley State Prison for Women, both in Chowchilla (Central California) and California Institution for Women in Corona (Southern California).

Implications

The children of incarcerated parents are at high risk for a number of negative behaviors that can lead, in some instances without positive intervention, to school failure, delinquency and intergenerational incarceration. The personal and social costs are high. In addition, the lack of research and official information means that government programs do not target these children and their caregivers in order to design or provide needed services. What can child welfare workers do to support these children? Several of the articles in this newsletter address these issues and provide helpful suggestions.

1 Simmons, C. (2000) Children of Incarcerated Patents, California Research Bureau, CRB Note Vol. 7, No. 2
 2 Office of the Attorney General, California, Web site
 3 Simmons, C. (2000)
 4 Mumola, C. J. (2000). Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Incarcerated parents and their children. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice
 5 Simmons, C. (2000)
 6 Simmons, C. (2000)

Tips for Facilitating a Visit Between a Child and an Incarcerated Parent

Helping a child visit a parent in prison takes time, planning and patience. This guide assumes that the caseworker has determined that visits would be appropriate, and there is no order in place prohibiting visitation. Here are a few concrete suggestions:

PLANNING THE VISIT

- There may be several adults in a child's life who can take him/her for a visit. The child welfare worker may help set up the visit but doesn't have to be the one to take the child; however, child welfare needs to make sure that children are in regular contact with their incarcerated parent and that includes visitation.
- Make sure you know which facility a parent is in. If the parent is in a California state prison, you can call the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation inmate locator phone line. If the parent is in a county jail, contact the county sheriff's office. To locate an inmate, you must have the person's full name and date of birth or CDCR identification number. Inmates are often moved around among facilities; it's important to regularly check on where the parent is before planning and making a visit.
- Check to see what the process is to get approved for a visit with the parent. County jail staff may deal with this issue on visiting day. In state prisons, this approval needs to be in place before the visit, and it can take up to six months. The incarcerated person must initiate the clearance process.
- Find out what the guidelines are for visiting a facility. This includes visiting hours and times and visiting requirements such as how many people can be at a visit. These guidelines not only differ by facility but sometimes by area of the facility. Visiting guidelines often are on the facility Web site. (Visiting Guidelines for CDCR are available at www.cdcr.ca.gov/visitors/docs/inmatevisitingguidelines.)
- Find out if the child and parent will be allowed contact visits and what the restrictions might be. In some cases, visit restrictions may be changed for an inmate's child. The caseworker should contact the jail personnel ahead of time.

PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

- Before setting out on the visit, call the facility to make sure it is open for visits and find out if the parent is still approved for a visit. In prison, visiting status is usually on a recording.
- Find out what kind of identification is required for both adults and children to get into the facility. If the facility requires ID for minor children (prisons do), a birth certificate is usually sufficient. The adult accompanying the child also needs to bring proof of authority to bring the child to a visit. Caseworkers should bring both a driver's license and a work ID.

- Know the facility's clothing guidelines for visits. Every facility has guidelines for appropriate clothing and accessories, and this can include children as well as adults. Avoid clothes with metal in them. The best tip is to dress simply and conservatively.
- Learn the guidelines for what you can and can't bring to a visit. For example, the CDCR has a strict list of what is permissible in state facilities including guidelines for baby formula, diapers and toys. These restrictions mean that children cannot bring homemade presents for their parent.
- Long trips to visit a parent can be expensive. The trip may even mean an overnight stay. Help the caregiver explore community resources that might be able to defray the cost of traveling.
- Prepare the parent. The parent should be in touch with the caregiver, if possible, to get updates on the child's development. The caregiver might also give the parent information on what the child likes to do and some suggestions of topics to talk about. If the parent is in a CDCR facility, the "Friends Outside" case manager on site can serve as a liaison between the child welfare worker, the caregiver and the incarcerated parent. They will work directly with the parent to prepare them for the visit.
- Prepare the child for the visit. If possible, visit the facility beforehand to see what the visiting process and location are like. If the parent is in a CDCR facility, the "Friends Outside" case manager can provide this information to the caregiver and/or child welfare worker.
- Bring food for the trip. Feed children before entering the facility. You can't bring food with you. (Sometimes there is an exception for baby food). Once in the facility, you are dependent on what is in the institution vending machines.
- Bring activities to entertain the child on the trip to the facility if the trip is long, but remember, many facilities will not allow you to bring toys to the visit.
- Arrive early. Know and prepare for the check-in procedures. These may be lengthy and uncomfortable. Only take what's allowed, and leave the rest in your car.

AT THE VISIT

- Most prison and jail visiting areas are not child friendly. Find out what the visiting area will be like. During the visit, the custodial adult is responsible for the child's behavior. If a visiting child gets too out of hand, the visiting adult and child may be asked to leave. If possible, let children leave the visit before the parent returns to his/her unit/cell.
- "Friends Outside" is an organization that has visitors' centers on the grounds of all the California State Corrections facilities. These centers have places for children to play, extra baby supplies, appropriate clothing, some available child care and places to store belongings that may not be allowed in the prison.

Adapted from materials on visiting in the Children of Prisoners Library and the Colorado Child Welfare Procedures Manual Appendix "Children Visiting Incarcerated Parents." Thanks to Gretchen Newby from Friends Outside for her generous feedback.

Suggestions for Helping Incarcerated Parents Make the Most of Visits with their Children

Infants and toddlers (0-3 years old)

- Play Peek-a-boo, patty cake, talk, hold and cuddle them (if allowed).
- Draw pictures, count with them, play the face game (e.g., make a happy face, sad face, surprised face, etc.).
- Tell them a story.
- Tell them you love them.
- Preschoolers and kindergarteners (4-6 years old)
- Draw pictures for your children to color.
- Make up short stories using their names as the main characters.
- Recite poems and nursery rhymes.
- Have them practice their numbers and the alphabet.
- Read them a story.
- Talk about favorite things you've shared with them.
- Listen, listen, listen, listen.
- Tell them you love them.

School age (7-10 years old)

- Make up word puzzles.
- Develop ongoing games and stories in which both you and your children can participate.
- Play cards, dominoes, Legos, read books, use material available at the prison.
- Draw pictures, and encourage your children to do the same.
- Listen, listen, listen, listen.
- Tell them you love them.

Recent Legislative Efforts

Over the past several years numerous efforts have been made in the California Legislature to address the needs of incarcerated parents and their children. Despite these efforts, the only piece of legislation to pass was AB 1942 in 2006. This bill was added to a section of the penal code and encourages law enforcement to ask arrestees if they are custodial parents and to allow them to make arrangements for their children at the time of arrest. The bill also encourages collaboration among child welfare, law enforcement and any other relevant community entities to develop protocols to address the needs of minor children when their parents are arrested.

All other bills addressing this issue were either not passed or vetoed by the governor. They include 1) AB 2159 (2001-02) which directed courts to inquire whether a defendant has any children and what arrangements have been made for the care of these children; 2) AB 1803 (2003-04) which examined placement issues when a woman delivers a child while an inmate in state prison;

Early teenage years (11-14 years old)

- Talk with them. Communication is one of the most important things you have to offer.
- Ask them about what's going on in their life (e.g., school, friends, activities).
- Ask how they are feeling and what you can do to help support them, especially if they help care for younger siblings.
- Participate in games, cards, whatever is furnished by your facility.
- Listen, listen, listen, listen.
- Tell them you love them.

Later teenage years (15-18 years old)

- Ask about how they are doing in school and about any plans for college.
- Talk with them about their future plans for work, living on their own, and other "real life" issues like drugs or alcohol and relationships.
- If possible, you might try and visit with your teenager alone so that you have some time to talk privately with them.
- Listen, listen, listen, listen.
- Tell them you love them.

Source: "Parenting From Prison: A Resource Guide for Parents Incarcerated in Colorado" by Barbara S. Bosley, Christie Donner, Carolyn McLean and Ellen Toomey-Hale.



3) SB 1287 (2003-04) which required that custodial parents be informed of the consequences of any plea agreement they are considering on their parenting status; and 4) SB 366 (2005-06) which looked at improving visiting conditions between parents and children in state prisons.

For more information about current legislative efforts, go to www.leginfo.ca.gov

Source: "Parenting From Prison: A Resource Guide for Parents Incarcerated in Colorado" by Barbara S. Bosley, Christie Donner, Carolyn McLean and Ellen Toomey-Hale.



Project WHAT!

speaks out on behalf of youth with incarcerated parents

“I know that I’m scared to say that my mom’s in prison because I wouldn’t want people to look at me differently just because of who my mom is. Because that’s not who I intend to be.”
~ Bay Area youth from a 2007 Project WHAT focus group

A group of San Francisco Bay Area teens and young adults has made it their mission to improve the quality of life for children whose parents are in prison or jail. In less than two years, this group of young advocates has already reached more than 1,000 service providers and public officials through its trainings and presentations.

Launched in 2006, Project WHAT! (which stands for “We’re Here and Talking”) raises awareness about the impacts of parental incarceration on children with the long-term goal of improving services and policies that affect these children. The program employs young people who have experienced parental incarceration—or those who have a parent under the supervision of the criminal justice system—as the primary curriculum content developers and facilitators for trainings.

To date, the group has trained caregivers at the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and their Families Children’s Summit; foster care professionals at the Casey Family Programs Annual “It’s My Life” Conferences; physicians, hospital personnel and community health workers at Oakland Children’s Hospital; staff and interns at Legal Services for Prisoners with Children; social workers, parole officers and community service providers at a conference sponsored by the Greater Bay Area Child Abuse Prevention Coalition; educators at the Teachers 4 Social Justice annual conferences; and family service providers at Alameda County First 5.

Last year a research team made up of Project WHAT youth staff surveyed and conducted focus groups with youth, teachers, social workers and professionals who interact with youth in the Bay Area. The primary research question was: How can the services provided to youth with incarcerated parents be improved? Here are the results of their research:

Findings

- There are barriers to service providers giving good services, including the need for more resources.
- Students who are struggling academically need more support from teachers, in particular.
- People treat youth differently because of a parent’s incarceration.
- A parent’s incarceration can impact a young person’s school life.
- Fear of social workers can create a bad relationship between youth and social workers.
- Having a relationship with the incarcerated parent is often important to youth.

Recommendations for social workers and child welfare agencies

- More resources need to be allocated for social worker training on how to support children of incarcerated parents.
- Family members taking care of children of incarcerated parents should be provided with funding so that the children can live with familiar people.
- Social workers and child welfare departments should consider sibling relationships; extra resources should be available to support placements together.
- The child welfare department should create a position for a specialist to support social workers. If possible, hire people with personal experience with the issue. The specialist should learn jail/prison visiting procedures and help arrange transportation, including transportation vouchers.

Recommendations for teachers and schools

- Teachers should attend trainings to learn about the impact of parental incarceration on children and how to support students with incarcerated parents. Teachers should earn professional development credits for these trainings.
- Teachers should assign two to three confidential assignments per year in which students can share issues related to their personal life.
- School counselors should learn visiting procedures and transportation options.

In addition to research, developing curriculum and providing training to social workers, teachers and other service providers, the Project WHAT! team recently developed a “Resource Guide for Teens with a Parent in Prison or Jail.” The guide answers common questions that children have when a parent is incarcerated. It has an entire section that explains complex jail and prison visiting procedures in plain language. It also includes compelling stories written by youth, along with a CD of the stories read aloud. The guide can be downloaded for free at www.community-works-ca.org/programs/projectwhat.html.

Project WHAT! operates as part of a Bay Area organization called Community Works, which provides disenfranchised populations in the Bay Area with opportunities to build community and give voice to their experiences. For more information about this project, go to: www.community-works-ca.org/programs/projectwhat.html

So Much We Can Do:

Challenges for Child Welfare Administrators

For child welfare administrators, working with families in which a parent is incarcerated and the children are in foster care can provide some particular challenges. In its 2006 report, “Rebuilding Families, Reclaiming Lives,” the Brennan Center for Justice notes that “Parental incarceration also adds one more layer of bureaucracy for a child’s caseworker to negotiate in facilitating family reunification.” What follows are some issues for administrators to consider when evaluating their department’s work with children who have incarcerated parents.

- Administrators need to remember that in child welfare the purpose of supporting and facilitating visitation with a non-custodial parent is to maintain and enhance bonding between the children and their parent. A second purpose for those parents who are struggling with how to be a safe and effective parent is to get the chance to “learn, practice and demonstrate” positive parenting skills. For the above reasons, visitation with a non-custodial parent is the law in child welfare, with very few exceptions. Parental incarceration in itself is not one of these exceptions. Incarcerated parents and children have the right to regular contact including visitation. It’s the law.
- One of the biggest challenges for child welfare administrators is to reconcile the timelines imposed by the federal Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) for permanency with the length of an incarcerated parent’s sentence. Most incarcerated parents have sentences longer than the act’s 22-month provision. Incarcerated parents must demonstrate that they have met a number of child welfare stipulations to prevent termination of their parental rights. Without consistent family visiting services and assistance in meeting child welfare law requirements, incarcerated parents are at serious and disproportionate risk of losing their parental rights. Administrators need to make sure they are doing what they can to support family reunification in this unique situation.
- Reasonable active effort: The Brennan Center for Justice states this challenge as follows: Federal child welfare law requires states to make “reasonable efforts” to reunify families when children have been removed. This includes families with incarcerated parents. In light of the unique barriers to reunification that families with incarcerated parents face, “reasonable” reunification efforts must include not only services tailored to the physi-

cal and emotional needs of parents and children separated by prison walls, but also a reasonable time period in which to draw meaningful and lasting benefits from such services both during and after parental incarceration.

- The fastest, most direct way for incarcerated parents to stay in regular contact with child welfare staff about the status of their case and any questions they might have is to call them. Administrators should make sure that their phone system accepts collect calls.
- There is a lot of misinformation and prejudice about incarcerated parents. Administrators can combat this by making sure their staff has the opportunity to learn about incarcerated parents and their children. Education should also include information about how to facilitate contact, including visits.
- California law recommends that child welfare and police departments create protocols that address children’s needs when a parent is arrested. This includes letting the parent make provisions for his/her children’s care at the time of the arrest. Child welfare administrators should contact their local police or sheriff’s department to set up these protocols if they aren’t yet in place.
- Some child welfare departments have designated a person(s) to develop relationships with jail and prison staff and take responsibility for scheduling visits.
- Advocacy: Besides the above issues, there are many areas that would positively impact the ease of maintaining the parent/child bond when a parent is incarcerated including:
 - a) Find out people’s parenting status when they are arrested. This will let the system know if children are in the mix.
 - b) Consider a person’s parenting status during sentencing. This may lead to vigorously investigating other options besides incarceration. It should also be a factor in determining where a person is incarcerated.
 - c) Help jails and prisons address the importance of child-friendly visits for children of incarcerated parents, including the issue of contact vs. no contact and child-friendly visiting areas.

Read to Me

Nothing can replace the comfort, security and love a child feels when he or she is snuggled in bed, listening to a bedtime story read by Mom or Dad. But when a parent is behind bars, children often miss out on this wonderful experience and the feelings of warmth and love that go with it.

To bring this experience back to children, several programs throughout the U.S. are helping children and their incarcerated parent remain connected despite the distance between them. "Read to Me" International is one such program. Founded in 1996 on the island of Hawaii, volunteers, armed with children's books and tape recorders venture through prison gates with the charge of taping mothers' voices as they read a story out loud to their child. With a personalized message at the beginning from mom, the tapes and book arrive via U.S. mail to the child's home approximately six times per year.

Mary Weir, a volunteer for "Read to Me", said the incarcerated mothers are very eager for this opportunity, often asking when they see her walk in: "When is my next time? Can I do it again?" Weir finds the experience with the women endearing as they choose a special book they believe their child will like best and read it with animation. She also added it provides mothers a chance to mother, the personalized messages often encourage their children to "behave well for Grandma."

Not only do the mothers enjoy this experience, their children love receiving the books from mom and hearing her voice as they fall asleep. Weir reported one foster mother plays the story for the two month-old infant she fosters as the baby sleeps to help the infant bond with her incarcerated mother.



To learn more about this program, visit www.Readtomeintl.org

Resources

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, MD 21202
Phone: (410) 547-6600
www.aecf.org

Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School

161 Avenue of the Americas (6th Ave),
New York, N.Y. 10013
Phone: (212) 998-6730

Bureau of Justice Statistics

810 Seventh Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20531
Phone: (202) 307-0765
www.ojp.gov/bjs/

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

For information about locating, contacting, visiting and corresponding with inmates and juveniles who are in a CDCR prison or juvenile facility, go to www.cdcr.ca.gov/Visitors/index.html. Also, get institutional statistics on any CDCR facility at www.cdcr.ca.gov/Visitors/Facilities/index.html.

California Research Bureau, a Division of the California State Library

P.O. Box 942837
Sacramento, CA 94237-0001
www.library.ca.gov/crb/CRBSearch.aspx

Centerforce

2955 Kerner Blvd., 2nd Floor
San Rafael, CA 94901
Phone: (415) 456-9980
www.centerforce.org

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

P.O. Box 41-286
Eagle Rock, California 90041
Phone: (626) 449.2470
<http://e-ccip.org>

Family and Corrections Network

93 Old York Road Suite 1#510
Jenkintown, PA 19046
Phone: (215) 576-1110
www.fcnetwork.org.

Friends Outside National Organization

P.O. Box 4085
Stockton, CA 95204
Phone: (209) 955-0701
www.friendsoutside.org

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

1540 Market St., Suite 490
San Francisco, CA 94102
Phone: (415) 255-7036
www.prisonerswithchildren.org

The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning Hunter College School of Social Work

29 East 79th Street
New York, NY 10065
Phone: (212) 452-7053
www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp

San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership

P.O. Box 293
1563 Solano Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94707
www.sfcipp.org

Women's Prison Association

110 Second Avenue
New York, NY 10003
Phone: (646) 336-6100
www.wpaonline.org

Announcements

NEW ONLINE COURSE!

Working with Incarcerated Parents

Coming this fall, watch for a new online resource class to support social workers on working with incarcerated parents. Developed in partnership with "Friends Outside" and other organizations, this course will be both informative and a helpful resource for identifying contacts at prisons, dress codes, policies and processes for visitation as well as other important information to support visitation between children and their parents. For more information visit our Web site at: www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy

Nurses Symposium 2008

May 29, 2008

University Club, UC Davis campus

This year's Nurses Symposium will focus on feeding and nutrition issues for children and adolescents in the foster care system. For more information visit our Web site at www.humanservices.ucdavis.edu/academy.

Books for Parents, Caregivers and Professionals to Read with Children of Prisoners

- A Visit to the Big House by Oliver Butterworth. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1993, ISBN #0-395-52805-4.
- I Know How You Feel Because This Happened to Me. Center for Children with Incarcerated Parents, Pacific Oaks College and Children's Programs, 714 West California Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91105.
- Just for You – Children with Incarcerated Parents. Center for Children with Incarcerated Parents, Pacific Oaks College and Children's Programs, 714 West California Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91105.
- Mama Loves Me from Away by Pat Brisson, illustrated by Laurie Caple. Boyds Mills Press, 815 Church Street, Honesdale, PA 18431, www.boydsmillspress.com 2004, ISBN# 1-56397-966-7.
- My Mother and I Are Growing Stronger by Inez Maury. New Seed Press, PO Box 9488, Berkeley, CA 947099, ISBN# 0-938678-06-X.
- Two in Every Hundred: A special workbook for children with a parent in prison Reconciliation, 702 51st Avenue North, Nashville, TN 37209, (615) 292-6371.
- Visiting Day by Jacqueline Woodson, James Ransome (Illustrator), Scholastic Press; 1st edition (October 1, 2002).
- When Andy's Father Went to Prison by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Albert Whitman and Company, 5747 Howard Street, Niles, IL 606487-4012, ISBN #0-8075-8874-1.
- A novel for 10-14 year olds: The Same Stuff as Stars by Katherine Paterson, Clarion Books, NY, 2002, ISBN 0-618-24744-0.

In Our Next Issue

Look for more articles, research, success stories and resources in our next issue of *Reaching Out*. The next issue will provide information on research-based tools and methods which support the professional development of those serving children and families in the child welfare system.

About the Northern California Training Academy

The Northern California Training Academy provides training, technical assistance and consultation for 33 northern California counties. The counties include rural and urban counties with various training challenges for child welfare staff. The focus on integrated training across disciplines is a high priority in the region. This publication is supported by funds from the California Department of Social Services.

About The Center for Human Services

The Center began in 1979 with a small grant to train child welfare workers in northern California. It has grown to become an organization that offers staff development and professional services to public and private human service agencies throughout the state. The Center combines a depth of knowledge about human service agencies, a standard of excellence associated with the University of California, extensive experience in developing human resources and a deep dedication to public social services.

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