

A Guide to Helping Children
with a Parent in Prison



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I. Introduction

Hi. My name is Jennifer Wyse and I am currently a student in the Applied Developmental Psychology program at the University of Pittsburgh. I am also a full time teacher. During my time teaching, I have had the privilege of working with children from a variety of backgrounds and families. This experience led me to focus on the subject of incarcerated parents for this podcast.

This guide is meant to accompany my podcast, Helping Children with a Parent in Prison, and contains additional information that was not included in the actual podcast. Some of this information includes: a list of books for children, youth, and adults, website and services available, and suggestions.

For more information on other emotional or behavioral needs for you or your children, please visit www.sbbh.pitt.edu, as it is an extensive resource for the public. I hope that this podcast and study guide were helpful to you and your loved ones.

II. Glossary

1. Cope: *verb*. To deal with and attempt to overcome problems and difficulties.
2. Incarcerate: *transitive verb*. To put in prison or to subject to confinement.
3. Jail: *noun*. A place where people are held in confinement under lawful custody, under the jurisdiction of a **local** government.
4. Prison: *noun*. An institution (under the jurisdiction of the **state**) for the confinement of people convicted of serious crimes.
5. Relocate: *transitive verb*. Establish or lay out in a new place.
6. Stigma: *noun*. A mark of shame or discredit.

*These definitions were taken from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary

III. Podcast

Introduction

Hello, my name is Jennifer Wyse. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my podcast about teachers who are caring for a child with a parent in jail. In this podcast, I will discuss some of the research available on this topic. This includes: the affects of a parent in prison, general visitation guidelines, and helpful programs and resources available designed to help families cope.

Consider this story. Sarah, a seven year old girl, was sleeping peacefully in her bed last week when she was startled by a knocking on the door. The police had come to take her father to prison. Sarah is suddenly surrounded by her family: crying, desperate, confused. After a long, emotional night, Sarah wakes up the next morning to a restructured family. Her father, who had been the working parent, is now in prison. Sarah's mother must now find a job to support her family. Now, a week later, Sarah is back in school. She tries to smile and listen to her teacher, but all she can think of is her family.

Teaching a Child with a Parent in Prison

It is difficult to focus on school when so many other social and emotional issues are surfacing within a child's life. Children and adolescents seem to have more and more worries and stressors that can affect their ability and desire to learn. One of these less discussed difficulties many children and youth face today is when a parent goes to prison. This loss of a parental presence carries with it unique difficulties for the child to manage.

Children who are separated from their parents in prison can experience difficulties such as psychological, emotional, or conduct and behavioral problems. Fortunately, there are many services and resources available for families and educators, to help navigate through this time.

You may be struggling with the fact that your student has to cope with a parent in prison, but you are not alone. Over the last several decades, the number of children with an incarcerated parent has increased dramatically. Today, it is estimated that there are around 1.5 million children with a parent in prison (Miller, 2006, p. 472).

Social stigma surrounds a child whose parent is in prison, making it even more difficult for them to cope (Johnson, 2006, p.4). Often, children are unsure of how to respond to questions about their parents, because it is difficult to talk about, because they have been directed not to talk about it, or because they themselves have not been told the truth.

Children spend most of their time in school. It is easy to see why this would be difficult in a school environment. After all, activities, writings, and lessons often focus on the family, and parents are invited to participate in school activities. According to Johnson, research tells us that these children feel embarrassment and shame. They may also withdraw from others (Johnson, 2006, p. 4). Teachers should be respectful of a caretaker's preference on the issue (Clopton & East, 2008, p.197). If the person taking care of the child at home does not want the parent discussed, then it is important for the teacher to be respectful of that decision.

As in any situation, children react in different ways. While most parents who are in prison are fathers, more and more mothers are being sent to jail. When parents are in

jail, children often face a change in homes and siblings may be separated. New caregivers may come into the child's life. When it is the father who is in prison, 90% of the time the child stays in the mother's care (Phillips & Bloom, 1998, p. 531). However, in the case of a mother's incarceration, children are more likely to be relocated and live with relatives (Phillips & Bloom, 1998, p. 531). This shift in environment, as for any child, can be challenging.

From Children to Adolescents: How they cope

Age is another factor in how the affects of a parent in prison. Children in the elementary grade levels have begun to shift their perspective of the world from their family to the school. During this time, peer relationships are important and help shape the child's sense of self and the world. Rules and consequences for breaking these rules are unchanging in their minds. Children whose parents are in prison become vulnerable to teasing, again, because of the stigma attached to imprisonment (Johnson, 2006, p.4). For these children, we have books that explore the many different emotions and situations children may experience. One in particular, *Nine Candles* by M. Testa focuses on the impact of visiting a parent in prison. For more books, see the study guide that accompanies this podcast.

Middle school students are very concerned with being social. Students are becoming more independent and make more personal choices. Children in this age group learn through example from adults. Estrin (2006), in her article of parent incarceration, emphasizes the importance of adults being genuine and honest (p.8). Children are

learning about consequences. During this time, children may refuse to visit parents as a means of exercising their decision making.

Teenagers have been introduced to an entirely new set of decisions to make. Some teens have dealt with an ongoing cycle of parental incarceration, and in turn, the separation that it involves. As a result, these adolescents become less and less hopeful for the ideal that their parent will return to be with them. For other teenagers, this can be a new and frightening part of their reality. Substance abuse and depression are just two of the possible negative outcomes of these situations for teenagers (Miller, 2006, p. 273). It is important that the teachers within these children's lives are aware of resources available to them.

Visiting a Parent in Prison

Perhaps a parent has asked your advice regarding visiting a loved one in prison. Unfortunately, there is little research to support whether or not visiting a parent in prison is either harmful or helpful. For some children, visitation is impossible, because of money or travel.

Clopton and East (2008) surveyed adults who accompanied children to visit their parents in prison (p. 198). Their results showed that about half of the children showed some behavior responses to the visits (p. 198). Most of these reactions were hyperactivity and excitement. On the other hand, visitation may help children through their feelings of rejection that often come with the separation of a child and parent. Children's behavioral reactions to visitations may vary. Visits may affect their performance in school. For some children, behavioral reactions can last more than a day. It is important for teachers to be

aware and prepared for excitability and mood changes during this time (Clopton & East, 2008, p. 198). Other children may find visits awkward or scary. Their reaction may be to withdraw. As each child is an individual and can respond differently, teachers may need to provide different supports for these students. It is often helpful when parents are direct with their child's teachers, keeping them informed of visits so that the teacher can accommodate to that child's particular needs.

The following is some helpful information that can be shared with a parent when visiting a prison. When going to visit a loved one in prison, you should be aware of the many regulations that a particular prison has before making the trip with your child. Each prison may have some differences. This information can easily be accessed by going to the website for that prison. If you are unsure of the web address, it can easily be found by simply typing in the name of the jail at www.google.com. The following is some general information that may be helpful when considering a visit.

Within days of being admitted to the prison, every inmate is required to submit a list of 4 or 5 people who will then be allowed to visit. Children under 18 do not need to be included on this list. There are specific visitation hours within the jail which regulate when you can or cannot go to see your loved one. Also, each inmate has a limited amount of visitation time a week. For instance, in the Allegheny County Jail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, inmates are allowed a total of two-one hour visits a week (<http://www.county.allegheny.pa.us/jail/>). The number of people who are allowed to visit differs depending on the prison, although most jails are 2 or 3 visitors at a time. This includes children under the age of 18. These visits usually need to be scheduled with the jail at least one hour before the time you would like to arrive.

You may also be wondering what you and your child are permitted to bring or wear. Be sure you have photo identification when you arrive, you will be asked to show it. This will most likely be exchanged for a visitor's pass that you will turn back in at the end of your visit. No food or drinks are allowed to be taken into the prison but you will most likely find vending machines inside. You will also be required to leave all of your personal items in a designated place within the jail before you proceed to the visit. Everything you bring will be left, most likely in a secure locker, where you can pick it up when you leave. Another important note is that no jewelry is allowed to be worn during the visit, with the exception of a wedding band. If you are visiting with a small child, the prison will have certain items for the child you are allowed to take with you. Some facilities allow only a bottle while others allow as much as a diaper bag.

Staying Connected

It is helpful to know that many prisons have resources and services available internally to help children and families stay connected while their parent is in prison. Again, specific information for your institution can be accessed at their particular website. At the Allegheny County Jail that was previously mentioned, there is a family activity center. This center is equipped with a play area and healthy snacks and is designed to help ease the child's stress during the visit.

If your child is unable or unwilling to visit your loved one, there are other ways to keep your family in touch. One resource to help children and youth cope with their separation is a literacy program called Aunt Mary's Storybook Project . This unique program was founded in 1993 in Chicago, Illinois, and provides children with a recorded

story read aloud to them by their parents. The program is now available in 21 states. One of the program's goals is to provide positive relationships between parents and children who are separated by prison. Funding for the books and services provided by Aunt Mary's Storybook project are donated by local churches and other groups and organizations. For more information, look for the web address in the study guide that accompanies this project.

This is one of many resources available to parents and teachers. Specific resources may vary depending on your national location. In the accompanying study guide, there are links to websites that will direct you to resources available in your area. The websites listed are nationally recognized organizations dedicated to helping families who are dealing with the incarceration of a loved one. They are full of helpful informational links and resources that you will find useful.

I hope that this podcast has been helpful to you in your effort to help students and their families. Thank you for listening.

IV. Children of Incarcerated Parents: A 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.**

*Taken from www.sfcipp.org.

V. Other Resources

The following is a list of books written to help children with a parent in prison. If they are unavailable at your local bookstore, they are available online at www.amazon.com.

For Children:

Amber was Brave, Essie was Smart: The Story of Essie and Amber Told Here in Poems and Pictures by Vera B. Williams (Greenwillow Books, 2001).

Dad's in Prison by Sandra Cain, Margaret Speed & Zui Mukjia (A&C Black, 1999).

Maybe Days: A Book for Children in Foster Care by Jennifer Wilgocki, Marcia Kahn Wright, & Alissa Imre Geis (American Psychological Association, Magination Press, 2001).

My Mother and I Are Growing Stronger by Inez Muary (Volcano Press, www.volcanopress.com)

Nine Candles by Maria Testa (Carolhoda Books, 1996).

Visiting Day by Jacquelyn Woodson (Scholastic Books, 2002).

When Andy's Father Went to Prison by Martha Whitmore Hickman and Larry Raymond (Albert Whitman & Company, 1990).

For Youth:

An Inmate's Daughter by Jan Walker (Raven Publishing, 2006).

Breadwinner by Deborah Ellis (Groundwood Books, 2001).

Breaking Out by Barthe Declements (Demco Media, 1993).

Habibi by Naomi Shihab Nye (Simon Pulse Books, 1999).

Looking for X by Deborah Ellis (Groundwood Books, 2001).

The Other Side of Truth by Beverly Naidoo (Amistad, 2002).

The Same Stuff as Stars by Katherine Peterson (Clarion Books, 2002).

Additional Websites

There are several websites available that are designed to help families with a loved one in prison. Each of the following sites has resources available that are designed to be both informative and practical. Some also offer services to families and children.

- The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents (CCHIP)

CCHIP offers an extensive list of free resources available to parents and families dealing with a family member who is incarcerated as well as several different services, from therapy to family reunification services.

<http://e-ccip.org/index.html>

- The National Resource Center for Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Families and Corrections Network

The FCN has extensive list of programs, a resource library, and fact sheets created to help children and families all over the nation. There is also a “spotlight” section highlights informational articles that are of use to families dealing with an incarcerated loved one.

<http://fcnetwork.org/>

- National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections

This resource offers a variety of articles that deal with different aspects of the effects of parental incarceration.

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/children-of-incarcerated-parents.html

- The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Provides services for at risk children in New England and Baltimore. This site also provides a list of books for adults on the subject of children with incarcerated parents.

<http://www.aecf.org/ChildFamilyServices.aspx>

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