

Children of Prisoners Library

www.fcnetwork.org

For Caregivers: CPL 201



Caring for Children of Prisoners

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

PDF version

Different Ages/Different Issues

Having a parent in prison or jail poses different challenges for the child at each stage of development.

Infancy: the first year of life

It may seem that a baby less than one year old would not react to the incarceration of a parent, but this is an important stage of development. Infants are learning to connect or attach to their caregivers. They are learning to trust that adults are there to meet their needs.

In this attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent. They may even miss a parent that was inconsistently available to the child prior to incarceration. If a primary caregiver parent “disappears” to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust. Attachments can develop between infants and their new caregivers. But the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placement, and by any further disruptions in care giving relationships.

Toddlers: 1 and 2 year olds

Toddlers want to see if their attachments to the important adults in their world will hold up to their new needs. They need to run away and they need to say “NO.” Practicing these new verbal and motor skills will make the adults react in ways that feel controlling to the toddler. Toddlers want to be independent, not controlled—but they also want to feel safe. The tug between the desire for independence and the need to be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge any caregiver.

Caregivers of children of prisoners pour emotional and physical resources into managing life in the criminal justice system and have little left for coping with a toddler's extreme upsets.

Pre-Schoolers: 3-5 years

This is often called the age of opposition, power and control battles and magical thinking. At this stage of development, children need to prove to themselves that they are separate and unique, that they are themselves and not their caregivers.

"If I cooperate with you, I become you. And since I am me, not you, I will not cooperate and if you make me, I will hate you and wish you away." This is not really a thought but more a gut instinct in most 4 to 6 year-olds.

The new demands made by the adult world for self-control may lead children at this age to apply magical thinking and fantasy to the circumstances of their parent's incarceration. Pre-schoolers believe they are responsible in ways that are both illogical and unreasonable. They may believe that they wished the parent away when they were mad at them.

They may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting, sleeplessness, and eating disruptions. They may also develop fears, nightmares, and a return to the aggressive tantrums of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know that they have some influence on adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development to avoid feelings of guilt, loss of control, powerlessness, and loyalty conflicts that could have lasting consequences.

Early School-age: 5-8 years

The grade school child is beginning to replace parents as the center of their universe. These children will experience sadness at the separation, but have moved out into the world, are learning new skills, and are focused on their peer group. At this stage of development, children do understand the concept of "crime and punishment." As one first grader put it, "My Mommy is doing a really long time out." As they begin to focus on affiliating with other children, however, they become aware of the stigma of parental incarceration.

Early school-age children need to experience success and develop a sense of competence, with their adults and with peers. This makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates about parent's arrest or incarceration. They are not yet able to articulate the story or the feelings well enough to both satisfy peers and avoid upsetting or embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation and family loyalty can lead children to avoid school, develop physical ailments, and sometimes stop talking unless they are at home.

**Pre-adolescence:
9-11 years**

Pre-adolescence is the stage of social emotions. Children struggle to understand the fact that “right and wrong” can vary from family to family. They are striving to learn about their own feelings about peers and family members and to understand the meaning behind the behaviors of others. Adults need to provide labels for children’s feelings without judging them.

Adults also need to provide children with good role models and teach children communication skills by saying what they mean and listening with compassion. Pre-adolescents are also making more choices on their own about homework, activities, and friends.

They need to be respected for their opinions and tastes. They may choose to distance themselves from the relationship with an incarcerated parent, partly to exercise their choice but also to avoid embarrassment.

Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Adults who act scared or angry but say “I am fine” will seriously confuse the developmental process of pre-adolescents. Such mixed messages may lead to acting out in an effort to understand what is really going on.

Adolescence

Teens are out in the world, trying to figure out who they are, where they are going, and who they want to go with them. They are also balancing taking risks and avoiding danger.

Many adolescents with incarcerated parents have experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent due to previous imprisonments or a chaotic lifestyle. Their experience has often included addictions, financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools, and communities lacking in resources.

Adolescents are often expected to assume adult roles. They may be left for long periods without supervision. They can suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent. They can, all at once, fear that they will turn out like their incarcerated parent, attempt to be like them, and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Keep in mind that children will react in many different ways to their parents’ imprisonment. These

reactions depend on their age, personality, family circumstances, environmental stress, details of the crime and incarceration and available supports.

About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the Family and Corrections Network (FCN) web site, www.fcnetwork.org. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold. Sorry, FCN is not budgeted to mail free copies. Send comments to The Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, 434/589-3036, 434/589-6520 Fax, fcn@fcnetwork.org. Copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003.

In Appreciation

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnston Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation. We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association. Special thanks to the Osborne Association for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, *How Can I Help?*

The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.