



STRONGER

TOGETHER

**Volume I:
The Experiences
of Children of
Incarcerated Parents**

**The Osborne
Association**
Transforming Lives, Communities,
and the Criminal Justice System

STRONGER TOGETHER

Volume I: The Experiences of Children of Incarcerated Parents

ABOUT THE OSBORNE ASSOCIATION

Founded in 1931, the Osborne Association works in partnership with individuals, families and communities to create opportunities for people affected by the criminal justice system to further develop their strengths and lead lives of responsibility and contribution. We design, implement, and advocate for solutions that prevent and reduce the damage caused by crime and incarceration.

ABOUT THE NEW YORK INITIATIVE FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents was launched by the Osborne Association in 2006, following the creation of the *Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights* by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership. The Initiative works with government, community, and faith-based partners to advocate for policies and practices that meet the needs and respect the rights of children whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system. The Initiative also serves as a tri-chair to the statewide Children of Incarcerated Parents Coordinating Council launched in October 2011.

Front cover photo by Teresa A. Miller, 2012.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *Stronger Together* handbooks owe their existence to the wisdom, insight, vision, and deep commitment of their original authors who in 1993 issued *How Can I Help?*, a series of three handbooks published by The Osborne Association. Written by Margaret Brooks (Volume I), Elizabeth Gaynes (Volume II), and Jane Schreiber and Elizabeth Gaynes (Volume III) and reviewed by an interdisciplinary advisory committee, much of what they wrote 20 years ago (for better or worse) holds true today. We also extend a heartfelt thank you to the children, youth, caregivers, and parents who shared their personal experiences and courage with us to enrich the updated handbooks.

The revised handbooks were updated by Elizabeth Gaynes, Tanya Krupat, Dana Lemaster-Schipani, and Joan Hunt. Volume III was developed by Gerard Wallace, and written by Gerard Wallace, Rachel Glaser, Michelle Rafael, Lynn Baniak, Tanya Krupat, Dana Lemaster-Schipani, and Elizabeth Gaynes. Virginia Lowery and Kasey Currier provided skillful copyediting.

We are grateful to Jedd Flanscha for his design, patience and persistence.

This work was made possible by the generous support of the Florence V. Burden Foundation.

Design by Jedd Flanscha at Yield Media.

©2013, The Osborne Association

All rights reserved. Published 2013.

Suggested citation: Brooks, M., Gaynes, E., Krupat, T., Lemaster-Schipani, D., et al. (2013). *Stronger Together: Volume I, Experiences of Children of Incarcerated Parents*. New York: The Osborne Association.

ABOUT THE HANDBOOKS

In 1993, The Osborne Association published a three-volume handbook series entitled *How Can I Help? Working with Children of Incarcerated Parents*. Almost twenty years later, the handbooks have been revised and are republished here under the new title, *Stronger Together*. This reflects our view that we must come together to address the needs of children with incarcerated parents, including overcoming the isolation that comes from the stigma and shame associated with incarceration. The goal of the original handbooks and of those reissued in 2012 is to champion and support the hundreds of thousands of children in New York State (and the millions of children nationally) whose lives are disrupted by the arrest and/or incarceration of a parent.

While the handbooks have changed since 1993, much of the content of the first series is still relevant and forms the core of the republished Volumes I and II. ***Volume I: Experiences of Children of Incarcerated Parents*** focuses on children's feelings, experiences, and responses. ***Volume II: Maintaining and Strengthening Family Ties for Children of Incarcerated Parents*** discusses why and how to maintain parent-child relationships. ***Volume III: Information for Non-Parent Caregivers of Children with Incarcerated Parents***—an entirely new handbook—provides needed information for and addresses the most common concerns of caregivers. Please note that the original 1993 Volume III was a handbook of general resources, which is now out of print, and is available as a PDF file (as are the new handbooks) on the Osborne Association website at www.osborneny.org.

All of the *Stronger Together* handbooks include information, tools, and resources, as well as vignettes and quotes to illustrate real-life examples. They are written for a diverse and broad audience who significantly touch and influence children's lives, including caregivers of all kinds, professionals, volunteers, family members, and other caring adults. While the handbooks focus on children and the criminal justice system in New York State, they are designed to be helpful for those in other states as well.

CAVEATS ABOUT THE STRONGER TOGETHER SERIES:

First, *the handbooks focus on the majority of situations in which parents are incarcerated for non-child-related crimes*. They do not address situations where a parent harmed a child directly or indirectly, such as when a violent act was committed against the other parent, a sibling, or family member. These are complex cases and require careful and ongoing assessment, professional advice, and therapeutic support.

Secondly, while some of the information in the handbooks may apply to children whose parents are being held within immigration detention facilities or facing possible deportation, there are substantial differences in their experiences and the resources available to them. It was beyond the scope of this series to address these issues, though we offer resources online.

Lastly, we have tried to address as wide a range of experiences and circumstances as possible, but do not pretend to have covered all possible scenarios.

We are committed to empowering you to proactively reach out to children with incarcerated parents and their families to assist them in navigating this challenging and often painful experience. No matter which volume you pick up first, **we strongly recommend that you read Volume I in its entirety**. It will strengthen your own understanding of children's feelings and responses, which will strengthen your ability to effectively respond to children's needs and in turn create supportive and understanding communities for children and families to live in—and for parents to return to.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 1: What We Know	8
Section 2: Common Feelings and Emotions	12
Fear, Anxiety, and Worry	13
Sadness and Isolation	14
Anger	15
Guilt	16
Stigma and Shame.....	18
Confusion about Values	19
Confusion about Roles	20
Resentment about Deception	20
Section 3: Criminal Justice System Stress Points.....	23
Arrest	25
Pre-Trial and During Trial	25
Sentencing	26
Incarceration.....	26
Parole.....	26
Pre-Release and Reentry	28
Section 4: Individual Experiences, Diverse Responses	32
Age and Stage of Development	33
Emotional Atmosphere within the Family.....	35
Level of Disruption	36
Individual Coping Ability	38
Nature of the Crime and Length of Sentence	38
Outside Supports	39
Section 5: What Can <i>You</i> Do?	40



SECTION 1: WHAT WE KNOW



Over the past four decades, there has been an explosive growth in the number of people arrested and incarcerated in jail and prison. The United States leads the world in incarceration, with an incarceration rate five to eight times that of other industrialized countries.¹ According to a Pew Center on the States report, in 2010 there were more than 2.3 million people in jails or prisons—most of whom were Black and Latino and incarcerated for non-violent offenses—of which, more than 1.2 million were parents of children under age 18.² In New York City alone, there were 338,314 men and women arrested in 2011; for New York State that year, the number of arrests was 576,319.³

Nationally, there are more than 2.7 million children under age 18 with an incarcerated parent, and approximately 10 million children who have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their lives.⁴ This translates into 1 in every 28 children (3.6%) having an incarcerated parent, up from 1 in 125 children just 25 years ago.

In New York State, it is estimated that more than 100,000 minor children have a parent serving time in prison or jail; this includes parents incarcerated in New York's 60 state prisons,⁵ those incarcerated in the county jails of New York's 62 counties (including Rikers Island in New York City) and in four federal prisons.⁶ The majority of incarcerated men and women are parents. These numbers actually under-count the number of children affected by a parent's arrest or incarceration. Many more children experience the incarceration of a close family member, yet these numbers remain unknown, because of the invisibility of this issue and the lack of responsibility of any single agency to keep statistics on this population of children (also, because, they do not include children over 18).

- 1 ABC News. "U.S. Prison Population Hits All-Time High: 2.3 Million". News Release, 6, June 2008.
- 2 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- 3 <http://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/crimnet/ojsa/stats.htm>.
- 4 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010).
- 5 As of January 2011 there were 56,315 men and women in New York State prisons, of which 2,206 were women. New York State Department of Correctional Services. (2011). *Under custody report: Profile of inmate population under custody as of January 1, 2011*. Albany, NY: Author.
- 6 The Osborne Association, (2010). *New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet*. Brooklyn, NY.

10 STRONGER TOGETHER: VOLUME I

Children with an incarcerated parent may live in high-risk environments and experience a host of consequences, from the emotional and psychological trauma of separation, increased family disintegration and/or dysfunction, residential and financial instability, developmental challenges, social stigma and emotional pain, and a greater likelihood of exposure to extreme poverty.⁷

Today, 1 in 9 African-American children (11.4%), 1 in 28 Hispanic children (3.5%) and 1 in 57 Caucasian children (1.8%) have an incarcerated parent.⁸

Most commonly, risk factors among children of incarcerated parents operate along two pathways: 1) parental problems that existed prior to and may have contributed to the parent's incarceration (e.g., addiction, mental illness, domestic violence), and 2) problems introduced as a result of the incarceration (e.g., family and school disruption, trauma, grief, stigma).⁹ Parental incarceration is recognized as an "adverse childhood experience" (ACE), a measure of childhood trauma developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁰ Exposure to multiple ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of long-term negative mental health and health outcomes. Parental incarceration differs from other adverse childhood experiences because of the unique combination of trauma, shame, and stigma.¹¹ It is important to remember that there is no single story that best describes what it is like for a child to have a parent who is incarcerated. Experiences are diverse and so are their risk and protective factors, and thus, their outcomes as well.

7 Phillips, S.D., Erkanlia, A., Keeler, G.P., Costellow, E.J., & Angold, A. (2006). Disentangling the risks: Parent criminal justice involvement and children's exposure to family risks. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5, pp. 667-702.

8 The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States. (2010).

9 Phillips, S.D., et al. (2006).

10 For more information on ACE, read the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/about.htm>.

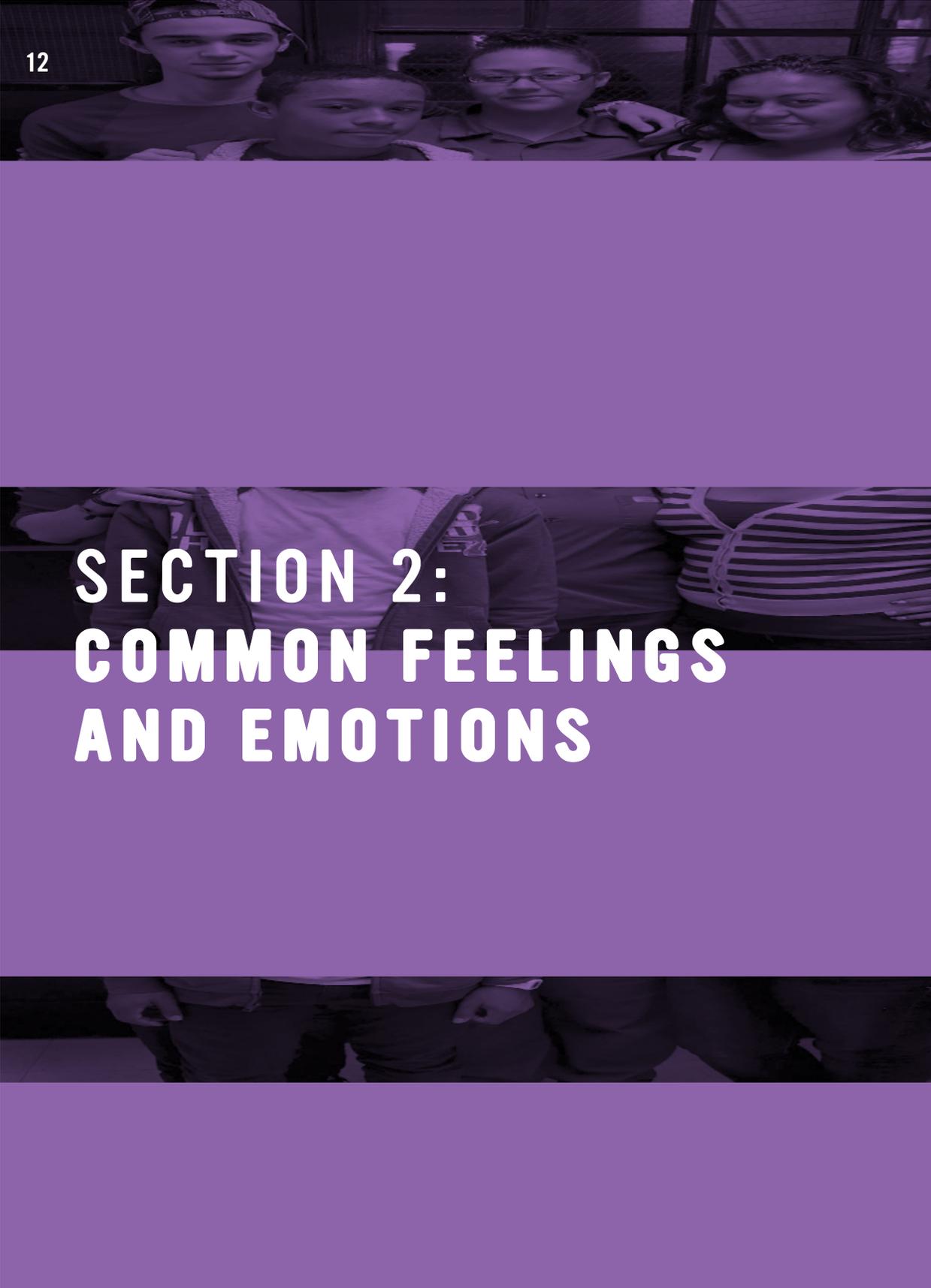
11 Raimon, M., Lee, A., & Genty, P. (2009). *Sometimes Good Intentions Yield Bad Results: ASFA's Effect on Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. In *Intentions and Results: A look back at the Adoption and Safe Families Act 121*. [Urban Institute Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009].

11 SECTION 1: WHAT WE KNOW

The level of disruption caused by incarceration is likely related to whether the incarcerated parent was the child's primary caregiver prior to arrest. While fathers are incarcerated at much higher rates than mothers and make up the majority of incarcerated parents, more frequently mothers have been the primary caregiver. However, many fathers report living with their children before their arrest and playing a significant role in their children's lives, including—but not only—financial support.

The incarceration of a primary caregiver usually leads to higher levels of destabilization, emotional consequences of separation, and increased risk for negative outcomes.

No matter what the specifics are, there is always an effect on a child when a parent is incarcerated. The effect may not always be visible or obvious, but even children who "do well" bear the heavy burden of stigma. The next section discusses common feelings experienced by the *millions* of children whose parent is or was incarcerated.



SECTION 2: COMMON FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

While every child responds differently and uniquely, parent-child separation is one of the most serious and potentially traumatic experiences a child can have. **For many children, the experience of a sudden separation from a parent due to arrest can be emotionally devastating, while for others it may be less destabilizing.** Children may have different feelings and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some common feelings children experience include: fear, anxiety and worry, sadness and isolation, anger, guilt, stigma and shame, confusion about roles, and resentment about deception. Each of these are discussed in the following pages.

FEAR, ANXIETY AND WORRY

The sudden disappearance of a parent is a terrifying experience. “Separation anxiety”—a developmental stage during which a child experiences anxiety/fear when separated from the primary caregiver—is a common response for children whose parent becomes incarcerated. This anxiety can be heightened at young pre-verbal ages when children do not understand where their parent has gone. It can also be affected by whether children witnessed the arrest or found out about their parent’s disappearance later. Reassurance from an adult that the parent will return or that the other parent will be able to take care of the child may not have the desired effect of alleviating the fear and anxiety present. Children may worry that other important people in their lives will disappear, worry about the disappeared parent, or fear for their own safety.

“When my mom would call home, I used to ask her, ‘Are you alright? Are they feeding you? Do you have a blanket at night?’ I was only 8 but I was acting like I was the mother.”
—Jason, age 16

14 STRONGER TOGETHER: VOLUME I

Separation anxiety may manifest itself in nightmares, reluctance to go to daycare or school, resistance to staying alone/without a parent or guardian, or clinging behavior to a person, animal or object. A child's fear and anxiety may be further compounded by the uncertainty inherent in the criminal justice process. One of the most burning questions that most children ask is, "When will my mommy/daddy be home?" When children or their parents do not have control over events, cannot explain situations, or are unable to predict outcomes, fear and anxiety tend to increase greatly.

Children may also feel fear about their parents' welfare. Anxiety can stimulate children to pick up information about the more negative and frightening aspects of prison/jail and can lead them to worry about the health, safety and wellbeing of the incarcerated parent. This can lead to a shifting of roles where the child starts to parent the parent. A child's fear can be exacerbated by a lack of information or hiding information, as many children are not told the truth about where their parents are. These issues are discussed further on p. 20.

SADNESS AND ISOLATION

Children separated from their parents have a tendency to feel abandoned. A child whose parent is incarcerated in most cases misses the parent. He may develop a personal explanation for why the parent is missing and this "explanation" (especially at younger ages) may place blame on the child. For example, "If only I'd behaved better, watched less TV, studied more, prayed more," are some common blame patterns among children. This self-blaming can contribute further to the child's sadness and isolation. It can lead to children questioning their own self-worth and whether they are loveable. Children may believe if their parents really loved them, they would have found a way not to be arrested or incarcerated.

"My father was incarcerated and that was a very lonely time for me."
—Dwight, age 15

Children with incarcerated parents may also feel isolated from friends. Children can be intolerant of differences, and peers may tease a child about his missing or incarcerated parent. Other peers (and adults) may not know what to say to a child about his new situation and avoid

15 SECTION 2: COMMON FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

contact with the child out of their own discomfort. Children may also feel isolated by normal activities around them such as school events attended by other children's parents, or school assignments such as interviewing a parent about their family tree or having a "bring your parent to school" day. Teachers and other adults may also misunderstand a child's behavior and instead of investigating its roots or seeking counseling/support for the child, may respond in ways that further isolate and separate him. This is particularly true for the child who turns his sadness and isolation outward and expresses anger. Those who turn their feelings inward are often not seen as readily as children with behavior problems needing attention. It is very important to be alert to signs of sadness and isolation in children. Behind these symptoms could be serious questions and troubles requiring intervention.

ANGER

Anger is a common emotion experienced by children when a parent is incarcerated, though anger can also be felt at the point of a parent's arrest. The child may be angry at the parent for abandoning her, or at the other parent or family members. It is very difficult for the child to express her anger at the incarcerated parent since that parent is not physically present and also may be described by the family as the victim. Often the child's anger is expressed at the remaining parent or caregiver, or against teachers or other adults. In some cases, it can be expressed against the child herself. Children can also feel a more abstract anger at what is happening, at authorities, at "the system," or at the world. They may have witnessed an arrest and be angry at the police. They may feel angry that other children have their parents at home and they don't. They may feel angry at the sentencing judge, the corrections officers, or others. This can be a frustrating anger since children rarely have enough information to form a concrete object for their anger.

Children experiencing anger as a result of the incarceration of a loved one can manifest various behaviors that can be perceived as anger, but are mostly coming from a place of hurt and sadness. When children are observed to be getting in trouble, "rebellious" or not listening, being "delinquent," or behaving differently, a signal is being sent to us that attention and understanding are needed.

GUILT

Although it is not logical, children often feel they are to blame for the bad things that happen to their loved ones. A child may feel that her parent's incarceration is a result of something he did or said. For example, a child may think, "If I hadn't always been bothering my mom, she wouldn't have been stressed out and gone back to drugs," or "Maybe if I hadn't kept asking for a new bike, my dad wouldn't have stolen that money." When a parent is incarcerated, a child can remember and possibly exaggerate the consequences of normal childhood misbehavior and come to believe that his misbehavior led to or caused his parent's incarceration.

A child who internalizes responsibility for her parent's incarceration is likely to experience guilt. Guilt can cause children to feel negatively about themselves. This can result in the child shying away from or experimenting with new behaviors, challenges, or responsibilities and may lead to a decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, children who believe they are the cause of their parent's incarceration may unconsciously seek punishment through provocative or antisocial behavior.

During a parent's incarceration, children can also experience another form of guilt: that associated with being on the "outside" and living life while their parent remains locked "inside." Children can feel guilty for enjoying events and milestones that their parent cannot and may even put off certain milestones (such as graduations and trips) so that they can hopefully experience these when their parent comes home. This can also be related to sadness and helplessness (sometimes more than guilt), as children want to share these experiences with a parent who is unable to participate and be physically present in their daily world and their growing up process.

Children may experience myriad feelings and emotions related to their parent's incarceration; some may be noticeable while others may not. Regardless, children should be observed, supported and, most importantly, listened to while they cope with this challenging time. **Anxiety, sadness, anger** and **guilt** are suffered by most children who are faced with parental loss. Children who are separated from their parents because of incarceration deal with the additional burden of *stigma*.

SHIRLEY

Shirley was 8 years old when her father was arrested. She went to live with her grandmother who told her this was not her fault. Shirley's school counselor also told her this wasn't her fault. But Shirley didn't believe them. The day her father was arrested, Shirley had forgotten her keys at school and had to go to a neighbor's house. This threw everything off and she was sure that it was because of this that her dad was arrested. Shirley became very serious and sad for her age. She often walked looking down at her feet. Finally, her Grandma was able to take Shirley to visit her father. Her dad sat Shirley on his lap and told her that he made some mistakes and couldn't be home right now but that this was not her fault. Hearing it from her dad somehow made all the difference for Shirley and she felt a huge weight lifted off her. She said, "Really Dad? You're not here because I forgot my keys at school?" When she left the visit, Shirley skipped for the first time in a long time and sang a song she made up herself, "He's not mad at me...it's not my fault."

STIGMA AND SHAME

The stigma experienced by the families of those who commit crimes is real and it is painful. Children may find themselves subject to taunts, isolation or other rejecting behavior by peers and adults.

“I did a presentation at my school about having a parent who is incarcerated because my father is. When I started, I asked how many kids had an incarcerated parent and 3 raised their hands. When I finished I asked the same question again and 15 said they did. It’s hard to come out and talk about this.”

—Jahnay, age 16

A child whose parent is incarcerated often feels torn between his emotions: he misses the parent and is angry at the parent; he may admire the parent and be ashamed at the same time; he may feel loyal to and also want to reject the parent. Taunts and rejection by others put this cauldron of emotion under intense pressure. Children in this situation can experience anger at those who criticize their incarcerated parent and may be moved to aggression in defense of the parent. They may also feel intense shame about the parent and move to reject and disavow their parent. Many children feel a combination of these emotions, although one feeling may be stronger at a particular time.

Stigma also serves to increase the isolation felt by a child of an incarcerated parent. This is an inwardly expressed emotion and those caring for or working with children of incarcerated parents should be aware that children who are not “acting out” may be struggling as much as those who are. While children who are separated from a parent through death or divorce can find solace and support outside the family in friends, relatives or teachers, children who have a parent in prison may feel unable to seek out such support for fear of rejection. This may be especially so for children of parents whose crimes are “white collar,” sex offenses, crimes against children, or high profile crimes. The language that caretakers and professionals use can unintentionally increase the isolation and stigma children experience. Frequently used terms such as “convict,” “offender,” and “inmate” (among others) to refer to a child’s mom or

19 SECTION 2: COMMON FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

dad are not helpful for children and can serve to add to the stigma and shame they feel, and further isolate them. It is much more helpful to refer to *parents* who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated *parents* or *people*, all of which recognize the humanity and parental role of the person who is incarcerated.

“After my dad was arrested, suddenly my best friend said I wasn’t allowed to come to her house any more. She said her mom said my family was a bad influence. That really hurt...and made me mad.” —*Shanise, age 10*

Because of all of this, children may be hesitant to ask for help and resist it when/if it is offered. Therefore, individuals who work with children of incarcerated parents should be aware of the reality of stigma and the potential feelings and/or behaviors associated with it. It is important to be attuned to the subtle cries for help that may lie beneath a child’s behavior, moods or attitudes.

CONFUSION ABOUT VALUES

Children learn not only by what their parents tell them but also by incorporating what their parents do, who they are and how they act. Incarceration represents a serious challenge to the child’s identity formation process. While a child may have heard from her parents about proper behavior and attitude, criminal activity on the part of the parent sends the child powerful, contradictory, and confusing messages. “Do as I say, not as I do,” is not an effective parenting technique, as children are looking to their parents to model—not just talk about—the values and behavior expected. Careful attention must be paid by family members—and ideally by incarcerated parents themselves—to help the child work through this challenging situation. When parents can take responsibility for their actions, acknowledge poor choices, and attempt to make amends for the harm done, this can be very powerful for children. Family members and professionals who can assist children in connecting with positive aspects of their parents can also help the children see themselves in certain aspects of the parent but not in others, thereby creating for themselves a future identity that includes their parent’s strengths, but does not include their parent’s criminal activity. Without

these efforts on the part of parents and professionals, there is the risk that the child will identify with the parent's criminal or antisocial behavior, increasing the child's likelihood of negative outcomes.

CONFUSION ABOUT ROLES

A frequent consequence of incarceration is that a child may be moved to occupy the place or role left vacant by the incarcerated parent. A child may be forced to become the "man or woman of the house," to parent her siblings, provide advice to children or other adults in the family, and sometimes even to become an economic provider for the family. While children may want to help out during a time of stress and re-shifting of family responsibilities, family members and professionals working with families should be mindful that these are usually roles too big to fill and children should be protected from assuming responsibilities beyond their age-appropriate means. While easier said than done, it is important to try to protect children and to allow them to remain children through this difficult time.

RESENTMENT ABOUT DECEPTION

As a result of the stigma discussed earlier, families faced with the reality of incarceration often try to hide the fact that they have a loved one in prison. Frequently used "cover up stories" include telling children their parents are away at school, in the military, working out of state, or in the hospital.

Though it may be well-intentioned, deception rarely succeeds, either in keeping a secret or protecting a child. Children are remarkably perceptive about what is going on around them. Instead of protecting the child from hurtful knowledge of the truth, deception tends to make the child feel more anxious, helpless, and isolated. A child who is not certain about what has happened to his parent may become preoccupied with worries and fears. In a household where the truth cannot be discussed, the child can become obsessed with thinking about the parent who has left. Children may come to believe that if adults are not telling them the truth, then the truth may be even more unbearably awful than previously thought. A child who has been told a false story about his missing parent has no outlet for his own anger, frustration, confusion and grief. How can he express his feelings to the adults around him when he isn't

21 SECTION 2: COMMON FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

supposed to know the story? If he has been told everything is really all right, how can he tell people that he is feeling upset, sad, and angry? And if he is not being told the truth about his parent, how can he trust that anything he is told is truthful? Children from whom the facts have been withheld are likely to resent those who deceived them when they find out the truth—as they almost always do.

Keep in mind that nowadays it is also possible for children to find out all about their parents through the Internet. Websites of corrections agencies generally include information about the whereabouts, criminal charges, sentence length and possible or anticipated release dates for people in their custody. For all of these reasons, a “truth fit to tell”—one that is developmentally appropriate—is what is best for children.¹² What is told, how it is told, with what degree of detail, in what sequence, in how many conversations, are all important, as are the subtle nuances that take into account the developmental readiness of the child, the family style of communication, and the values of the community. The parent or caregiver in the community (including foster parents and case-workers when children are in foster care) can benefit from assistance in deciding what to tell children and when to tell it. This is discussed in detail in **Volume II**.¹³

These are some of the most typical feelings and emotions experienced by children coping with the incarceration of a parent. The next section outlines some of the common behaviors and reactions of children in general, and at different points along the criminal justice system.

12 The phrase, “truth fit to tell” has been used by Nell Bernstein, author and Coordinator of the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership.

13 See *Stronger Together, Volume II: Maintaining and Strengthening Family Ties for Children of Incarcerated Parents*, Section 3: Supporting Positive Visiting Experiences for Children, “Preparing Children,” pp.17-20.

“As a young child I thought for a long time that my father was away in school. When my grandmother passed away (my father’s mother), he came to the funeral. It wasn’t until then, when I saw him chained and shackled, that I realized he was in prison, not school. I went up to my father to give him a hug, and the CO [correctional officer] had to remove his shackles and handcuffs in order for me to embrace him. I was young at the time but looking back now, I would have appreciated being told the truth about where my father was. It would have made me more trusting of my family then and now.”

—*Ryan, age 18*



**SECTION 3:
CRIMINAL JUSTICE
SYSTEM STRESS
POINTS**

24 STRONGER TOGETHER: VOLUME I

While there are common behaviors that many children exhibit, it is important to remember that each child copes and responds differently, with multiple factors contributing to his responses. Common behaviors and responses to parental arrest and its aftermath may include:

- developing physical symptoms: headaches, stomach aches, other illnesses or injuries, having nightmares, beginning to fear the dark, or clinging to the remaining parent or caretaker;
- showing signs of regression, for example, exhibiting behaviors of younger children such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking;
- withdrawing from friends and social relationships or previously enjoyed activities;
- retreating into denial and/or a fantasy world;
- showing anger, aggression, and hostility toward the adult in charge or toward other authority figures, like teachers;
- becoming disobedient and defiant at home or school, refusing to obey previously obeyed rules;
- suffering a decline in school work and social relationships at school or beginning to skip school.

STRESS POINTS

Just as previous family history and a child's developmental level will affect her response, so too may specific points of the criminal justice system trigger a reaction. Particular points of crisis can arise around the time of arrest, again during plea negotiations or trial, at sentencing, if/when the parent goes to prison, and before, during and after parole hearings.¹⁴ Stress that may have subsided over the course of a parent's incarceration may emerge again after the parent comes home. Sometimes the worrisome behaviors children exhibit come and go; they may appear near the parent's arrest only to disappear and then reappear

14 While some parents have determinate sentences with known release dates, many do not. Many have discretionary release dates (indeterminate sentences), with a date set for their Parole Board hearing. If release is granted, the Parole Board will then set a date for release.

25 SECTION 3: CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM STRESS POINTS

at a later point. A child who stops “acting out” may still be in pain, so it remains important to check in and offer consistent support even in the absence of loud cries for help.

ARREST

The trauma experienced by the child who has a parent taken from him is extraordinary, even more so if the child witnesses the arrest of the parent. The image of the person you love, respect, and depend on being handcuffed and forcibly taken away is devastating; even for children who do not witness the arrest, the image can be terrifying. Research found that children who witness their parent being arrested experience this as watching their parent being assaulted,¹⁵ which can also lead to negative feelings about law enforcement and the law. The arrest experience, plus the negative images portrayed by the media, can exacerbate a child’s fear and lead the child to envision the worst about the parent’s condition. Usually, neither families nor children have information about the arrest, arraignment and detention process, and children may worry about how, when and if they will ever see their mother or father again. A parent’s arrest is much more common than a parent’s incarceration, since most arrests do not actually lead to jail or prison sentences. Those who work with children should be mindful that parental arrest is not an uncommon experience for children, particularly in neighborhoods that are heavily policed, where young men are frequently stopped and frisked, often leading to arrests that lead to at least 2-3 days in custody. During much of this time, no one knows exactly where the parent is, or what is happening, and the adults are as confused as the children, often not paying attention to the children’s feelings because of their own.

PRE-TRIAL AND DURING TRIAL

The arrested parent may be detained during the pre-trial period or may be released on bail. In either case, it is a period of great uncertainty, when making plans is impossible since the outcomes are unpredictable. The child whose world has been suddenly disrupted is often unable to get answers to her questions, and does not know what is expected of her during this time of distress. It is often upsetting for children that the adults in their lives—whom they perceived as “all-knowing” and “all-powerful”—appear to be helpless and clueless.

15 Bernstein, N. (2005), *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (p. 95). New York, NY: The New Press.

SENTENCING

For the child and other family members, a prison sentence usually comes as a shock. While this may sound strange to those who work in the criminal justice system, and know that lawyers will generally have provided at least some warning of the possible outcome, families often continue to hope for a miracle, and friends and extended family may try to reassure them that their loved one will get the lightest sentence. Since family members are rarely considered when a sentence is imposed, and typically have little information or control at the sentencing phase, family members may neglect to discuss what might happen with children. This can leave children alone with their fears, struggles and changing feelings about what is happening. Even when the sentence is as expected, the sentence makes the fears around separation a reality for families, and the image of a steel door closing behind them can be very real for children. Complicating this further is that the sentencing phase can also extend for months, which is an eternity for children. During this time, the parent is often in a jail where visiting may be difficult or severely limited compared to prison.

INCARCERATION

For the child and other family members, the set of emotions experienced during incarceration is often compared to the loss of a family member to death. This metaphor does not take into consideration how shame, stigma and humiliation about prison life affect the child, nor the complicated, ambiguous and undefined nature of this deep loss. Children are aware of the gravity of the situation and may conjure up negative visions of what life in prison is like. Further complications occur when the remaining parent or caregiver is reluctant to allow children to visit a prison, whether to “protect” the child from further harm and distress or to punish the incarcerated individual by withholding love and visits. See **Volume II** for a detailed discussion of visiting.

PAROLE

For people who do not have a definite release date, the time leading up to a parole hearing can be very stressful for children who are aware of what is happening. Many children want to know what they can do to help their parent “get out.” Some children also worry that their parent will “mess up” or do something that will cause the Parole Board to deny their release. The hopefulness and anxiety around this time has a

ELLEN

When Ellen's father was first incarcerated, she wanted to stay home from school to be with her mother, and to sleep with her mother at night, but her mother was becoming much less fun to be with. Ellen's mother was sometimes angry that her husband had gotten himself into this mess, but she stuck by him and expected Ellen to do the same. When her husband was sent "upstate" to a prison nearly three hours from home, she would get up early on Saturday and get Ellen all dressed up to take the bus, train and taxi to get to the prison. If they got there early enough to avoid the long lines, they could sometimes visit for five hours before returning home.

At first, Ellen enjoyed the visits. She missed her father terribly, and was happy to see him. She worried about him when she didn't see him. When they visited, he made a big fuss over her. Her mother would tell her father about what a good girl she was, and her father would remind her to take care of her mother. But as she got older, she got tired of the long rides and the visits. She still wanted to visit, but she and her mother went less often. Her mother seemed less angry, and she and Ellen grew closer as they adjusted to this new family arrangement. Ellen still didn't tell her friends though and worried about what they would think of her and her family if they found out.

big impact on family members and children, although sometimes the incarcerated parent is so focused on his own preparation that he forgets about how much it means to his family. If the parole board's decision is positive, it can be a time of extreme joy and celebration. But even this welcome event can bring with it much tension as families prepare for the transition that some think will bring the end of the stressful times. If parole is denied, it is likely to be accompanied by anger, frustration, sadness and despair. Particularly as adult members process the news, they may be coping with their own feelings and not have much reserve left to be there to help children understand. There is a grieving process that can occur after a parole denial, with various stages of feelings taking place (anger, sadness, acceptance). Some children are angry with their parent, some with the "system," and some lose respect for the law when they feel their parent has done everything possible to demonstrate rehabilitation and yet still will not be released. This is a trauma that is often invisible to those outside of the family, and that serves to increase children's feelings of isolation.

Children whose parents are under parole supervision may be unaware of their parent's status or reporting requirements, which can place limitations on a parent's ability to fully parent. Parents may be limited by curfew and geographic restrictions that may prohibit them from taking their children places or participating in certain activities with them.

PRE-RELEASE AND REENTRY

Interestingly, the times just before and after release can be the most challenging for children and families. Problems that were present in the household before the incarceration are typically not dealt with while the individual is away and may greet everyone upon return. Children and families change during a parent's incarceration: children grow older and are at a different stage of development and need different things from their parents. They have also had to adapt and learn to cope day to day without the parent's presence and accessible guidance/involvement. Incarcerated parents may think of and parent the children at the age they were prior to the incarceration, and may continue to treat them that way unconsciously as they plan to resume parenting in the community.

The other custodial parent has also likely changed. In two-parent families, the parent left behind has gained independence and competence in areas previously handled by the partner. There may be considerable

TINA

Tina spoke with her mom by telephone and televisited with her in the months leading up to her parole hearing (since the prison was over 8 hours away).¹⁶ At first, neither one mentioned the upcoming date though it was on both of their minds. Tina was too scared to hope that this time her mom would come home. After 12 years of growing up without her mom, she rarely let herself imagine life with her mother present on a daily basis. Still, she couldn't help wanting her mom home more than anything else in the world. Finally, she and her mom did talk about it. Tina asked her mom to please, please, please not get into any trouble and her mom forewarned Tina that while she would try her best, the Parole Board made its own decisions. Tina submitted a letter to the Parole Board asking them to please release her mom. She was now 16 and really needed her mom home. The day came and went, and Tina had no news. Then she found out from an uncle that her mom was denied parole. She was so hurt by the news and almost even more hurt that her mom hadn't called to tell her. She didn't realize that her mother felt so disappointed, hurt and ashamed that she couldn't bring herself to face her daughter.

16 Televisiting is a form of communication between children and incarcerated parents that was first offered in New York State at Albion Correctional Facility, the largest women's prison in New York State, located by the Canadian border. In partnership with The Osborne Association, Albion offers a televisiting program where children in the New York City area go to Osborne's offices and televisit with their mothers in a comfortable, child-friendly room. (See also, **Volume II**, p. 53.)

tension about how the marital/committed relationship can go forward. The incarcerated parent has also changed. She has been living in a place where one suffers a loss of identity and respect, where anger and hostility are common, and where there is no privacy. He may have been forbidden to act on feelings or make any decisions regarding personal preferences. And the world he or she is returning to has changed significantly, particularly if the sentence served was long. Some people come home from prison having never seen a mobile phone, surfed the Internet, or paid so much for a cup of coffee. Their children seem to have more to teach them than to learn from them.

For families formed during incarceration—children born or step families created—the adjustment is significant, having never experienced daily family life together in the community. Finally, the expectations are high for parents coming home; they are expected to make up for the time that they spent away from their children and families, but this is a debt that cannot be repaid easily.

Despite the need for support at this time, there is little support or transitional counseling available to families to help them through this difficult time. The assumption that the hard times are over when incarceration ends can make the serious challenges families face upon reentry come as a rude and often painful awakening. This can be isolating, as those surrounding the family may also assume their difficulties are over and not offer support. While the reunion may be happy, many children and families report tremendous challenges and stress during the period of reentry, particularly if the separation has been very long.

DANIEL

Daniel was 17 when his mom came home after four years in Federal prison. It was an adjustment for them both. At first, Daniel kept his distance—protecting himself from being hurt again—but he also wanted to regain the time they had missed together and did not want to be far away from her. Applying to colleges, he changed his mind and decided to stay in his home town instead of going away, which he had thought he wanted to do. He also became concerned with his mom's being rejected from so many job interviews. He encouraged her to apply to college as well, telling her that they could do this together. Daniel did some research, found his mom a program specifically for women coming home from prison, and set up an appointment for her. He joked with her that he was her mother, but as time went on, he let go of his defensiveness and was happy to be her son again. They are now both in college and adjusting to being together again.



**SECTION 4:
INDIVIDUAL
EXPERIENCES,
DIVERSE
RESPONSES**

The feelings and challenges a child experiences and whether the child manifests behavior problems (and what those look like) will depend on many factors, including:

- the child's age and stage of development;
- the emotional atmosphere within the family (before the incarceration as well as after) and how well the remaining parent or caregiver is dealing with the crisis;
- how disruptive of everyday life the arrest or incarceration is (for example, whether the child enters foster care or has to change homes or schools);
- the quality of the parent-child relationship prior to incarceration;
- the child's individual coping abilities;
- the nature of the crime and the length of the sentence;
- the outside support systems available to the family.

AGE AND STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT

Children need different things from their parents at different stages of their lives. The child who is one or two years old is learning to develop trust in the world. Such children need to have a consistent caregiver to meet their needs reliably. A child whose parent is suddenly absent from her world may have trouble developing trust in others. At this age, a child who loses the primary caregiver will experience this as a trauma which threatens her future ability to attach, trust and have healthy relationships. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, "An intervention that separates a child from the primary caregiver who provides psychological support should be cautiously considered and treated as a matter of urgency and profound importance."¹⁷

The pre-schooler is still very dependent on her parents but is learning independence. The tug between the need to be dependent and the desire for independence makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent. In addition, the new demands

17 American Academy of Pediatrics: Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2000). Developmental issues of young children in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 106 (5). 1145-1150.

made by the outside world for self-control may lead children this age to engage in magical thinking, creating the fantasy that they are in some way responsible for the separation. Children this age (and older) may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting and other symptoms. Pre-schoolers tend to develop a strong attachment to the opposite sex parent/caregiver. If it is that parent who is incarcerated, the child may be especially angry and may express it by acting with hostility toward the remaining parent, or by directing the anger inward.

School-age children still place parents at the center of their world and will experience sadness (and possibly devastation if it is their primary caregiver who becomes incarcerated) at the separation. At this stage, children are beginning to understand that there are problems and solutions, but have not yet developed a mature ability to reason from one to the other. Children this age and older may be particularly vulnerable to believing that they are responsible for their parent's behavior. At this age, experiencing success and developing a sense of competence are very important. This can be threatened by taunts and bullying by classmates or family members who are aware of the parent's incarceration.

“The hardest part of my school experiences while my father was incarcerated—and he’s been incarcerated since I was 4—was not having him at my graduations, especially high school.”
—Kevin, age 19

During the teenage years youth begin to develop separate identities, recognizing themselves as distinct from their parents, but at the same time often seeking their parents' approval and praise. The regard of peers is also important, and teenagers strive to fit in with “the crowd.” Feeling outcast or excluded from a crowd because of a parent's incarceration can occur at this stage. Children of parents involved in the criminal justice system may also harbor fears that they too, will become just like their parent(s) based on assumptions that surround them.

At this age (and the previous ages as well), peer support and activities which connect children with other children who also have an incarcerated parent can have a powerful, positive impact.

EMOTIONAL ATMOSPHERE WITHIN THE FAMILY

Most studies show that for children who exhibit the most challenging behaviors, the arrest or incarceration of the parent is only the precipitating factor.¹⁸ These children have most likely already been exposed to multiple crises and stresses in the home, such as substance use, domestic violence, mental health issues, instability of living situations and negative encounters with law enforcement officials. Substance use and abuse is a significant factor in the arrest and incarceration of individuals. A recent report by the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University claims that 85% of people in prison need substance abuse treatment.¹⁹ The report also notes that only 11% of individuals in prison who need treatment are receiving treatment.²⁰

“We all struggle with our identity. Will we become our parents? Is being a criminal part of who we are?”

—*Khadesia, age 15*

Addiction often affects children prior to their parent’s arrest and/or incarceration. People struggling with substance abuse can be erratic and neglectful in their parenting since the nature of addiction typically places the priority on obtaining the drug. This does not mean that parents who abuse alcohol and other drugs do not love their children. Many parents continue to love and provide for their children despite their addictions and do not realize how their addiction is affecting their children. Some think they are hiding this from their children or protecting them from any effects by not consuming substances directly in front of them. Children—particularly older children—are often well aware of their parent’s drug and alcohol use and worry about overdose or other harmful effects. Parental substance abuse generally affects the stability of the family and can impact the way a child reacts to his parent’s incarceration (including relief at knowing where the parent is and that she will not overdose).

18 Different Children/Behaviors. (n.d.) In *Children of Prisoners Library CPL304*. Retrieved from <http://www.fcnetwork.org/cpl/CPL304-Different.pdf>.

19 CASA (2010) *Behind Bars II; Substance Abuse and America's Prison Population*.

20 CASA (2010). *Ibid.*

Children who experience the loss of one parent to incarceration will need to know that the other parent—or someone they know and love—will be able to take care of them. If it is the primary caregiver who is incarcerated, children may panic that there is no one to step in and assume this role. Thus, the way in which the remaining parent or caregiver copes with the crisis of incarceration will have a profound effect on the child. If the remaining parent or caregiver is aware of the child's emotions and needs, the child's stress will be significantly reduced. If the remaining parent or caregiver is depressed or angry or overwhelmed (all understandable), the child will pick up on the fact that the caregiver is not available and that there is no one to care for him. If caregivers also complain to the child or take their anger out on him, the stress and trauma experienced by the child is worsened. When caregivers who are strangers to the child step in—foster parents or unknown friends or relatives—children's anxiety, fear, and stress can be greatly increased, and professional intervention may be needed (particularly for young children).

LEVEL OF DISRUPTION

The disruption a child experiences will depend in part on how much the arrest or incarceration of a parent alters the child's everyday life. Perhaps his remaining caregiver will have to go to work for the first time or may have to quit her job to stay home with younger children. Another possibility is that the family may be forced to move from their home to live with relatives or friends, possibly causing the children to miss school or change schools. The most disruptive case often is when a child has to go into foster care. Typically, the more a child's everyday reality (caretakers, neighborhood, school) changes, the more difficult it will be for him to cope with the arrest or incarceration of a parent.

JUSTIN

After his mother's arrest, 8-year-old Justin stayed with his grandmother for two weeks. They were not a happy two weeks. Justin's grandmother was very angry with his mother. She kept talking about how she had told her to end her relationship with her boyfriend who was nothing but trouble, but she didn't listen. Justin felt lost without his mother. He had never been apart from her except for some sleepovers, and now he was afraid that he would never see her again. He was afraid to talk to his grandmother or ask her any questions. If he let her know how much he missed his mother, she might get so angry she would throw Justin out for still wanting to be with her.

His grandmother refused to take Justin to Rikers Island to visit his mother, saying she was too old and too sick to make that stressful trip. Nevertheless, Justin spoke with his mother on the phone almost every day. Now, Justin is sitting in a social worker's office, holding a stuffed animal, rocking and talking softly to himself. His mother was recently convicted and sentenced to 10 months in jail. Justin is being placed in foster care because his grandmother isn't well and can't provide for him; she also says she can't handle Justin's behavior which she says is alternatively clingy and rebellious.

INDIVIDUAL COPING ABILITY

Each child is unique, each family different, and the role of each child within a family varies. Children who appear to face similar situations, with parents facing similar changes, may react in widely divergent ways to their parent's arrest and incarceration. Children—even within the same family—may respond in different ways, based on temperament, personality, age, prior experiences, level of attachment to the parent, and coping styles.

It is important to be aware that those children who seem to be coping quite well with a parent's arrest or incarceration may be silently suffering intense emotions. While the behavior may seem ordinary, all children undergoing the stress of having a parent involved in the criminal justice system are feeling one or more of the emotions—sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and the pain of stigma—triggered by their parent's incarceration. A child whose behavior seems normal may need just as much support as a child who is obviously depressed, anxious, or angry.

The degree of previous loss and trauma experienced by the child prior to the parent's incarceration also affects the child's coping ability. Cumulative losses take their toll on a child's resilience and ability to endure and bounce back.²¹

NATURE OF THE CRIME AND LENGTH OF SENTENCE

The stigma of a parent's arrest can vary with the type of crime charged (including whether it was a high profile crime receiving media attention) and the child's social context. When a parent is charged with a sexually-based crime or a child-related crime, their children may experience intense and confusing feelings; parents are supposed to protect a child from harm, not inflict harm. In fact, people in prison for sexually-based and child-related crimes represent a small sliver of the population, but they receive enormous attention and have extreme stigma attached to them. While it is generally assumed that no parent-child contact is best in these cases, children (particularly older children) may want supported, therapeutic contact at some point to help them process and heal. This

21 New York City Early Childhood Mental Health Strategic Work Group. (2004). *Promoting the mental health and healthy development of New York's infants, toddlers, and preschoolers: A call to action*. New York, NY: Author.

39 SECTION 4: INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES, DIVERSE RESPONSES

requires careful assessment and re-assessment over time (see **Volume II** for a detailed discussion about visiting).

The length of sentence can also affect how a child copes with a parent's incarceration. Time moves more slowly for children than it does for adults. A sentence of one year may seem like a very, very long time. A sentence of four years can be an eternity. A sentence of eight years for a young child is literally unfathomable. Generally, the longer the child is separated from the parent, the more difficult it will be for her. It is also extremely important to be aware of how time is discussed with younger children. It is best to avoid commonly thrown around phrases such as, "Mom will be home *soon*," because "soon" to an adult can refer to one year, while to a child, he may wake up the next day expecting his mom to be home. This is also important to discuss with incarcerated parents who may want to reassure their children that they will be home soon, but can end up disappointing or misleading them.

According to one child whose father was incarcerated for much of her life, "Many people think we're doing a service to children, when a parent is doing life, in having them sever contact. But as children, we understand who we are as human beings by understanding who our parents are."²²

OUTSIDE SUPPORTS

Outside supports can assist children in coping with the pain of their parent's absence. These supports can be individuals or community or faith groups or programs. These supports can be financial, logistical, social or emotional. A grandmother, favorite uncle, or teacher can play an important role in supplying a child with *some* of the needs that are not being met by the incarcerated parent. A peer support group or community program, particularly one that discusses parental incarceration openly and nonjudgmentally, can provide young people with a sense of belonging and normalcy that may be lacking in other aspects of their lives.

Because arrests occur with greater frequency in some communities than others, it is often assumed that children in high incarceration communities are less stigmatized and better able to talk about—and get support for—their circumstances. These assumptions are not supported by research or experience.

22 Quoting Emani Davis, Bernstein, N. (2005), *All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated* (p. 95). New York, NY: The New Press.



SECTION 5: WHAT CAN *YOU* DO?



For parents, caregivers and individuals engaged with children during and after their parents' arrest and incarceration, it is important to understand the many feelings children will have, as well as how these may be expressed in their behaviors and activities. But understanding is not enough; actions are what will make the difference. Here are some concrete ways you can support children:

ACKNOWLEDGE/VALIDATE THE EXPERIENCE:

Children need to have an adult acknowledge their painful and conflicted feelings. Remember, although an adult may be well intentioned when telling a child not to worry, or responding by minimizing the loss expressed, or deceiving a child about the parent's actual circumstances, what helps children is validating their experiences, their feelings, fears, anger, and guilt. It is most important that we listen and respond with age-appropriate truths, when possible. Providing "answers" is not as important.

BE AWARE OF POTENTIAL EMOTIONS/REACTIONS:

You should be aware that the child need not have been living with the parent who has been arrested or incarcerated to feel a range of strong emotions. Ask open-ended questions about her feelings, like "Are you thinking a lot about your mom/dad these days? Do you want to talk about it?" Allow children to express their feelings. Respond to the feelings expressed; don't tell children what they should be feeling.

DON'T LECTURE, BUT RATHER ASK QUESTIONS:

Ask whether anything is bothering the child. You might say that you noticed a change in behavior. "You're usually the first one out on the basketball court and now I don't see you. Is anything up?" Or, "You got a C on this paper. It's not like you to hand in this kind of work." Or, "Is everything all right at home?" Or, "You are so quiet and seem sad. Is there something I can do?"

PROACTIVELY SIGNAL THAT YOU ARE SOMEONE (OPEN AND NONJUDGMENTAL) THEY CAN TALK TO ABOUT INCARCERATION:

Post the *Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights* (see inside back cover) in your office or worksite where children can see it. Include mention of parental incarceration on intake forms, in examples used when talking about stressors children face, and more. Your acknowledgment of this issue will make it much easier and safer for children and youth to talk about their own parent's incarceration.

There will be times when a child denies that anything is wrong. It may be that the child does not truly know what has happened to his parent or that she has been told not to tell anyone, or that he has had a negative experience with a helping professional or adult to whom he disclosed in the past. Some important points to keep in mind:

- If you can't determine the cause of the child's change in behavior or demeanor by asking him, you might consider approaching his parent or other caretaker, as you normally would in dealing with a child's problem.
- It is wise to focus on your perceptions of how the child has changed and not to suggest any particular cause. If the family does not want to tell you that the parent has been incarcerated, you may alienate them by suggesting any such thing.
- A family that will admit to you that a parent has been arrested, but does not want the child to know, may benefit from suggestions about how to tell the child an age-appropriate truth and why this is important (the benefits of doing so) (See **Volume II**, p. 18).

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOU

A detailed list of resources is available on the Osborne Association's website, along with many helpful materials about the criminal justice system and its impact on children and families (www.osborneny.org). Also, please contact us through our toll-free helpline 1-800-344-3314. Osborne staff and volunteers can provide you with information and assistance regarding maintaining communications between incarcerated parents and their children. Osborne offers programs for children of incarcerated parents, for incarcerated parents, and parents returning home, a support group for caregivers and family members, a national hotline for family members of the incarcerated, and much more. We can lead you to other excellent programs and services of value to the children with whom you work, live and play.

TEN TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS:²³

- 1 Assess your own values and beliefs** regarding incarcerated people and their families. News media and television shows provide sensational but not especially accurate or representative descriptions of people who have committed crimes, the prisons in which they are held, and the families they leave behind, perhaps affecting your approaches and responses in your own work.
- 2 Commit to being an active, non-judgmental listener.** Let the child lead the conversation and respond with encouraging, open-ended questions when appropriate. Try not to press the issue, pry for your personal purposes or curiosity, or ask for more details than you need to know to be of help.
- 3 Be conscious of your language (including body language).** Try to stay away from using words such as “inmate,” “ex-offender,” “convict,” “prisoner,” “murderer” as it may alienate the child and the parent. Instead, try using language that respects the individual as a human being before you define him by his actions. For example, a person charged with a crime, a parent who is incarcerated or a person who is formerly incarcerated.
- 4 Invest time in educating yourself and getting training** about the different stages of incarceration, how the criminal justice system works and its impact on children.
- 5 Respect confidentiality.** When a young person shares personal information about her experience with a parent’s incarceration, you have likely developed a level of trust in the relationship with that young person. A breach of this confidence can have negative consequences for the youth and make it hard for her to trust you again. If it becomes absolutely necessary to share the information (i.e., if the young person threatens to hurt herself or someone else) then it is important to communicate with the young person that you will have to share this information. Let young people

²³ The Osborne Association Youth Advisory Board (2009). *Ten tips for supporting children with incarcerated parents* [Fact Sheet].

know that what they share is confidential except in situations where it is felt that they are a danger to themselves or to others.

- 6 **Include parental or family incarceration on appropriate forms/records utilized by your agency** so that service providers, teachers, and mentors may be aware of the challenges a young person is facing. A child who can “check the box” indicating they have a parent who is incarcerated is being told by its presence on the form that this is a common, anticipated experience. Their disclosure not only helps determine how many children are affected, but can lead to further development of services to meet their needs.
- 7 **Support the parent-child relationship** through encouraging and helping to facilitate visits, letter writing and phone contact. In most cases this will be in the best interest of the child and parent.
- 8 **Create/support counseling and other after-school programs** that students can join voluntarily. Consider researching current groups that youth can join and encourage their participation.
- 9 **Post realistic/sensitive posters or pictures on the theme of parental separation**, including multiple ways that families are separated such as divorce, incarceration, illness, and military deployment.
- 10 **Become familiar with, post publicly, and help enact the *Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights*.**²⁴

24 For more information about the *Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights* developed in San Francisco in 2005, please see www.sfcipp.org.

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 STRUGGLE WITH MY PARENT'S INCARCERATION.**
- 7 I have the right NOT TO BE JUDGED, BLAMED OR LABELED BECAUSE OF MY PARENT'S INCARCERATION.**
- 8 I have the right TO A LIFELONG RELATIONSHIP WITH MY PARENT.**



**The New York Initiative for
Children of Incarcerated Parents**

The Osborne Association
www.osborneny.org

Bronx Office:
809 Westchester Avenue
Bronx, NY 10455
718-707-2600

Brooklyn Office:
175 Remsen Street, 8th Floor
Brooklyn, NY 11201
718-637-6560

Poughkeepsie Office:
25 Market Street, 6th Floor
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601
845-345-9845

Family Support Hotline:
800-344-3314



**The Osborne
Association** 
Transforming Lives, Communities,
and the Criminal Justice System