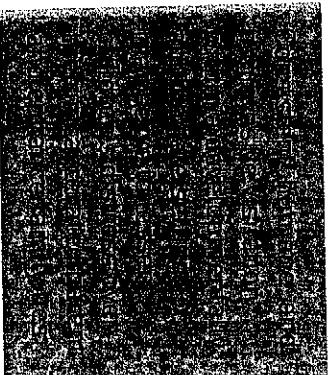


Parental Imprisonment and Family Visitation: A Brief Overview and Recommendations for Family Friendly Practice

by Joyce A. Arditti, Ph.D.

Background: Parental Imprisonment and Children's Adjustment

Current estimates indicate that it is likely at least 10 million children have a parent who is involved in the criminal justice system (Reed & Reed, 1998), and that substantial portions of incarcerated women and men are parents (Mumola, 2000). Incarceration has profound emotional, social, and economic effects on families. The research is clear that incarceration is associated with unstable and estranged parent-child relationships with respect to the imprisoned parent (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Arditti & Few, 2007). The stress of incarceration can also undermine the quality of children's relationship with their non-incarcerated caregiver to the extent the caregiver and child adjustment is compromised. The effects of parental incarceration on child adjustment are more profound if the incarcerated parent resided with the child prior to separation and was primarily responsible for their care (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Children with incarcerated mothers are at the greatest risk for psychological distress, behavior problems, and subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system themselves, given that most mothers lived with their children prior to imprisonment and were primary caregivers (Dallaire, 2007; Poehlman, 2005).



Visitation

Visitation can potentially benefit the incarcerated parent and provide emotional and psychological continuity for family members. Many imprisoned parents feel that on balance, visits with their children are worthwhile and serve to strengthen family bonds. While family visits seem to be helpful to the imprisoned parent, the effects of visits on children are complex and depend on a variety of factors including the structural aspects of visiting,

children's developmental status, the nature of children's relationship with the imprisoned parent prior to incarceration, and the quality of coping and resources in children's current family arrangements (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002).

In general, barriers and obstacles associated with visitation may undermine any therapeutic value of visiting for family members, and could potentially exacerbate loss-related trauma. The extent to which an environment is *promoting* or *inhibiting* is ecologically significant and has developmental implications for families and children. Of particular concern are environments that restrict exploration by children and put pressure on parents to provide regulation (Arditti, 2003).

Research indicates that prison visiting is both psychologically and physically demanding for children and adults, and the visiting conditions in most facilities are poor (Hanrison, 1998). Visits may be emotionally painful and create distress for both the inmate and their children (Arditti, 2003; Arditti, Smock & Parkman, 2005; Arditti & Few, 2007).

Furthermore, family members often have to withstand humiliation and rude treatment by correctional officers, often visiting in crowded, noisy, and dirty facilities (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest,

2003). Family members also report feeling a sense of degradation and stigmatization when visiting due to their association with the inmate. Such situations can lead to permanent, rather than temporary, severance of family ties due to a lack of meaningful contact to support an enduring bond between children and parents. For many, going on visits entails major expenditures of time, money, and energy. Despite their devotion, some families may sever

contact with the incarcerated parent due to scarce resources or social disapproval for utilizing limited resources for visitation (Christian, 2005).

Common problems associated with visitation include:

- Transportation—particularly when inmate is housed far from home
- Expense (gas, airfare, hotel, meals, snacks in visiting room)
- Parenting stress due to interaction with corrections staff, waiting
- Boredom, restriction for children
- Emotional and cognitive reactions precipitated by visit

In addition to the problems cited above, it is important to note that families forgo other opportunities when they visit. The decision to forgo these opportunities may negatively impact the family depending on:

- Length and frequency of visits
- The extent to which visits deplete economic and social resources
- The extent to which foregone opportunities are developmentally promoting or enhance family resources

"Family Friendly" Visiting

Family friendly visitation programs have been promoted by prison administrators, academics, and prisoner advocates albeit for very different reasons (Loper & Tuerk, 2006). For example, prison administrators are interested in finding ways to limit the stress of institutionalization in order to reduce the likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior on the part of the inmate during his or her incarceration. Prison visitation programs may then distract, soothe, and occupy the inmate with the benefit of facilitating social reintegration as family ties are paramount in ensuring successful reentry (Travis, 2005). Prisoner advocates and some academics favor family friendly visitation, purporting the benefits of a more humane visitation environment

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and rightly criticizing punitive, highly restrictive visitation policies. Advocates for family friendly visiting seek to promote family ties for their own sake and minimize harm for children. Indeed family friendly visitation may temper the negative effects of contact with an imprisoned parent and facilitate family adjustment.

Features of such programs include:

- Developmentally appropriate activities at the facility
- An alternate location for visitation that appears "non-institutional" (e.g. a less restrictive environment, movable seating, outdoor visiting).
- Staff support and less invasive visiting procedures (e.g. security checks)

It is not entirely clear what the effects of family visitation are for child adjustment. Programmers should be mindful of the degree to which families may already experience "secondary prisonization" -- that is the extent to which the family organizes their life around the incarceration (Comfort, 2008). In doing so, family members forego social connections and other opportunities outside of prison (such as church, recreation, school groups etc).

In some cases visitation may be contraindicated based on the child's experience and current state. Some things workers can consider before supporting visitation of a parent are:

- Evidence of traumatic stress
- History of child maltreatment
- History of violence between inmate parent and visiting caregiver

In sum, family friendly visitation programs can be beneficial to the inmate and potentially helpful for children and their caregivers. Consistent, humane, and non-invasive visitation within a developmentally appropriate setting may serve to lessen children's distress over their incarcerated parent and enhance family ties—a particularly important consideration if the inmate will be assuming primary parenting responsibilities upon release from confinement. It is worth noting that many justice programs such as parent/child visitation programs are widely

thorough evaluation, and at times these can actually "backfire" or have harmful effects (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenaue, 2000). Thus, family friendly visitation programs must be promoted and undertaken with an eye toward secondary prisonization indicators and specified contraindications like those noted above.

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she have easy access to the trusted school official.

Caregiver

1. Provide the incarcerated parent with information about his or her child's education.
2. If caregivers bring children to a visit with their incarcerated parent, encourage part of the discussion to be centered around school updates.
3. Save the student's work and share it with the incarcerated parent either through mail or during a visit (when applicable). Make sure you are aware of facility rules for giving materials to an incarcerated parent.
4. Participate in teacher conferences and special education planning sessions.

Incarcerated Parent

1. Use whatever contact mechanisms are available (i.e. phone, mail, third party communication through a social worker) to inquire about your child's well-being, school attendance and performance. When possible, discuss this information with your children so that they know that you are interested and involved in all aspects of their daily lives. This demonstrates the importance of education to your child.
2. Request that you be allowed to use your telephone privileges to participate in teacher conferences with your child's teacher.
3. If your child has special education needs, request that you be allowed to participate in the meeting via conference call (when applicable).

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with correctional institutions. Training and organizational supports to help child welfare staff better understand and handle the uncertainties of prison terms and the administrative rules and regulations associated with correctional supervision are also needed. Changes of this nature are crucial in enabling staff to plan effectively for the children under their care and to provide guidance for foster parents as well.

The importance of child welfare involvement in addressing the issue of parental incarceration extends beyond providing support for children in foster care. Relatives caring for children whose parents are in prison often need information and services that help them address issues of parent-child separation and reunification. Some families need assistance and support in order to make informed decisions about children's relationships with parents who may harm them physically or emotionally. These are areas in which child welfare staff have tremendous knowledge and expertise. However, many families will not seek help from formal child welfare agencies for fear that exposure of the parent's status or of children's problems will lead to the removal of children from their homes and placement in foster care. Child welfare agencies can be an important resource in developing prevention and intervention services in which families may participate voluntarily. These services to families need not be provided by child welfare agencies, but could be developed in partnership with other social service organizations and community groups.

Parental incarceration is a fact of life for millions of children and families and not simply a criminal justice issue or an individual matter. For all intents and purposes, parental incarceration is a matter of children's well-being, where child welfare services and intervention clearly matter.

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