

## ***Supporting Youth with Incarcerated Parents: For School Staff***

- Narrator:** As educators and school based staff, we can make a difference in the lives of children and youth in our schools who are affected by the absence of an incarcerated parent. One in 28 children or youth in our schools has an incarcerated parent. This statistic tells us these youth are learning in our classrooms, reading in our libraries, running on our playgrounds, eating in our cafeterias, and riding our school buses. Therefore, we have probably encountered these children in our careers.
- Ebony Underwood:** We know that there are over 2.2 million people that are incarcerated in the US. Nearly half of them are parents. At any given point in time, there are 2.7 million children with a parent that is incarcerated. What was astounding to me in doing the research around that was that there have been nearly 10 million children that at some point in their life that experience parental incarceration.
- Kharon:** I mean looking back to 10 year old me, I don't know if there is any way a teacher could've guessed or asked me in a certain way, but I know if they seen ... Like the way I was acting out, I feel like they should've took precautions and try to find out the root of the problem because I've been kicked out of elementary schools and all that for throwing a chair at a teacher. I just had so much anger in me. I never knew why. Nobody really paid attention. They just suspended me from the school and all that.
- Amelia:** Yes, I did have a teacher that was really great, who was very supportive, but I also had teachers who rather than asking why I was behaving this way decided to reprimand. And I think that kind of teaching is not very encouraging, and so I think what would be great, especially for educators, is to really realize if someone's ... I think this is kind of common sense like if someone's acting out, clearly there's something that's going on but also taking time to really develop a relationship and a friendship with that person. But that really has to start with trust.
- Jalon:** I actually felt kind of ashamed about having an incarcerated parent, being the fact that our society today, they don't really speak on things like that. They don't speak on those topics that are very personal. A lot of the times, we ... On Father's Day, we have those occasions and stuff, and we don't even take into consideration those kids that might not have parents or both their parents in their lives. Being that they've never really spoke about it, I never spoke about it.
- Ebony Underwood:** I can tell you from the day that I found out that he was incarcerated, the shame and the fear ... the fear that my friends would find out, that my teachers would find out. I was just like ... I froze up.

Amelia: I think there can be a lot of shame in having anyone incarcerated. I mean like family member, and because of that shame, I think I really struggled because I was so ashamed. So it was like this secret that I carried around, so I didn't know how to behave and be myself with this really big thing happening. Imagine being 15, and being 15 you're like feeling ... You're so insecure. You're like, "Do I look good today? Will this person like me?" They're also very basic teenage things that you're going through, so imagine going through that and being super insecure and then on top of that, having this big secret that you don't want to tell anyone because you feel like people will judge you or they just can't handle it.

Olu: I used to worry about like ... I used to see like on TV when people are in prison like the crazy side of prison. I don't know. I used to see crazy stuff on TV, but he used to call me when he was first arrested. And he used to tell me like, "It's not even like that. We don't even wear the same color jumpsuit." He used to tell me it's completely different from TV. No one's going to beat him up, none of that. That was the most I worried about, and of course how much time he was going to serve.

Kharon: I remember I was 10 years old, and I seen the mail on the bed. My mom sort of... She seen that I see my name on the letters, so she had no choice but to let me open it up and read it. And that's when I first seen the letter, and he's basically explaining where he's been. He's been trying to contact me for years and told me he's in prison, and that's when I finally had an understanding of where my dad was because before that my mom told me and everybody else he was in the military.

Tanya Krupat: So I think the common stressors that affect a lot of families when a parent is incarcerated is first the crisis, rarely was this planned for, and so everyone's usually in crisis, just processing and managing in the day to day. And then it depends if that parent was the main responsibility giver or financial caregiver, and that will have immediate impacts on the daily life of the kids, if the children need to be moved to other relatives. So I think there's a lot of instability that can characterize the beginning of the involvement, and meaning the time of arrest or the trial and sentencing.

I think understandably teachers may hesitate to raise this issue with children in part because it's very rare for teachers or any school staff to have training on this issue. And so they may be uncomfortable with it, and they may also feel that somehow talking about it could do more harm than good. Or they may just feel unqualified to discuss it because of the lack of training around the issue, and yet it can be very important for teachers to acknowledge if a child does say something to make sure that they respond in some supportive way even if it's, "Oh, tell me more about that," or, "Thank you for sharing that. I'd love to learn from you. What is that like?" Inviting the child to kind of be the expert and teach them. Sometimes as adults we feel like we have to be the expert, and we have to have the answers. And sometimes just creating those spaces for children to talk and you really listen can be enough.

Ann: I think for teachers, when children talk about having an incarcerated parent, that's the easiest situation. And then I really feel very strongly that teachers and schools should just jump to what they ordinarily do when children reveal something that you're worried about or you're concerned about or you want to clarify with a parent.

Christophe: And someone has to step into that void and provide some sort of comfort for that child, and I think teachers are very well placed to do that. When teachers have an opportunity to be trained and they feel confident that they can step in and provide some sort of love and attention to that child and talk about this issue with the parent, it really helps to remove the stigma, which we know is causing so much difficulty for children and I think gives the parent and the teacher themselves more confidence that they're really doing a good job in helping providing an environment for that child where they can actually develop at a healthy rate.

Bettina Brown: You really just overlook the issue, and it's not that you're trying to. You just ... It's just something that it's not talked about. So as a teacher, I try to go back and I let my colleagues know this is an issue, and we do have students here that's dealing with this. They need to be helped.

Ann: Teachers are in a position to be able to be some of the most effective, protective factors and supports when we talk about the risk of having an incarcerated parent. I don't like to talk about risk without talking about protective factors and how those two balance each other in pursuit of child wellbeing, and teachers really are in a position to be some of the most effective protective factors.

Tanya Krupat: So even though every child is unique and every situation is different, there are some common emotions and feelings that most children of incarcerated parents go through or have. Those would feel ... include confusion, often guilt, blame, anger, sadness, sometimes abandonment, fear, depends on their situations and kind of who steps in or what their world looks like after the parent isn't there anymore. So it can be a very difficult time with a lot of questions that people can't answer, and I think for them the confusion in not having answers can also be really hard for them to manage and carry into school every day. There are certain parts of the criminal justice system where adults don't have answers like how long is this trial going to take? Or how long will your parent be away? There often aren't concrete answers, which is hard enough on the adults, but the ambiguity around it is very hard for children to manage.

Ann: And yet because of the fact that so many people think that incarcerated parents are not so good for their children, the link then is if they're not that good for their children then it's not that important that they're not there. And that really has proven over and over again not to be true, that for most of these kids, that sudden absence or even an expected absence of that parent is traumatic.

- Tanya Krupat: So I can't say enough how important it is to maintain the parent child relationship, but most children benefit from building and maintaining a relationship with their incarcerated parent. And that can be through phone calls, letters, and visits.
- Ebony Underwood: The experience of going to visit a parent incarcerated is wonderful. It's wonderful when you're actually there with your parent, but the travel, the time that it takes to travel to get there, the experience of actually having to go through metal detectors, having sometimes to take off your clothing, having to be searched, that experience in and of itself is just, it makes you not want to go back really. I feel like sometimes it's just set up to make you not want to go back. However, when you do get to be with your parent, the love, the hope, the knowing that they're okay, the knowing that they love you still despite this experience, it's undeniable. Once you have to leave your parent, that's probably the worst part of a visit is actually having to leave.
- Kharon: First visit, the first visit was, I remember being excited, I was nervous, because I didn't know who this guy was, never met him a day in my life, but I remember walking up and seeing him, and him giving me a hug. I remember it was just a little weird, because I never knew him, but just seeing that we looked so much alike, it kind of put a bit of happiness inside of me that day, because I was still nervous at the same time, just to know that we looked alike and this is my dad. I'm finally seeing this guy. First visit was nerve wracking and exciting at the same time.
- A typical visit now, I come in, dab each other up, give each other hugs. He'd ask me the basic questions, "How are you? How you been? What you up to?" And then we just get to talking, and we just start talking about everything, life, what his plans are for if he does come out in October, because he goes on parole in October.
- I noticed, the last couple visits I went on with my dad, we've actually been talking more, because when I was younger, I used to go there and just be quiet because I didn't know what to say to him. So, I noticed our connection is building throughout the years, so now I actually enjoy the visits.
- Amelia: So, it's really funny. I think I have a closer relationship now with my father than I ever did when I was younger, and we can talk on the phone for 15 minutes at a time, but in that time, we really utilize it.
- I was dating someone, and he was like, "I have to talk to him," and I was like, "Oh, no no no." I was like, "I'm not having my dad, who's in prison, talking to someone I'm dating. Definitely not. That person would run away right away. I would, probably."
- But it's really sweet. He really wants to be involved.

- Tanya Krupat: If a child returns on Monday and they've visited their parent over the weekend, the child might be withdrawn, or you might see other behaviors that could be alarming or raise concern. Or the child falls asleep, and knowing that there was a visit can be helpful and just addressing those supportively, recognizing that it's probably just the stress and the pain of attachment and saying goodbye again. But with support, the child will be okay, and they benefit more from the visit than not having them.
- Angela: I think that it's important for educators to know that the way that they speak about folks that are just as involved, whether or not it's in jest or if it's serious, will have consequences for people that are feeling it directly. And a lot of times you won't know who is feeling it directly.
- Olu: Going through prison reform and the 13th Amendment, that type of stuff, you just ... You get to hear how the class feels about that topic, and a lot of them sound like they're compassionate towards people who are in prison because they feel like if you are in prison, you must have done something wrong. And so you deserve that type of treatment. It's just, it's never really been directed towards me, but it's just like you get to hear people's opinions and how people really feel about it. And it's raw because they don't know my situation, so it's straight up from how they feel.
- Amelia: For me what really helped, which is what one teacher did, was she was really great with following up with me, and she made me feel like I mattered. She actually didn't make it all about my father. She really just focused on me and my dreams and my goals and wasn't like, "These are the problems, so this is what you need to fix." But really like, "What are your goals, and where do you see yourself in five years?" If I was late to class or if I didn't show up to class, she would find me somewhere in the school. She would really, she would just follow up with me like every day and was consistent. It was really consistent. Even if I didn't respond, she'd never give up on me, and so I think sometimes it's really difficult to be consistent especially with young people who are very inconsistent in their own lives and aren't really thinking ... Like when you don't really think your life matters, you're not motivated to really respond or to keep up with people. So at that time I really didn't think a lot of ... I didn't really think my future mattered, and so I didn't make effort. Her consistency and patience is what really supported me, and I could tell that she cared, actually cared. Wasn't just doing it because it was an obligation or some sort of checklist but really did care about my future.
- Jalon: When I was younger, and I think that's when it affected me the most when I was younger. After I got a little older, I kind of like just decided that I didn't really ... I was not too phased by it. When I was younger, a lot younger, maybe around elementary school years ... On Father's Day, we used to write the cards to our fathers, and we used to write letters and stuff. I remember one specific time, I had to have been maybe fourth grade. We wrote letters to our fathers, and by

the time I got home, I threw it away because for the simple fact that I didn't know where to put it. I didn't know where to send it. I didn't know who to give it to. I didn't know what to do with it. It was just basically space that I was just taking up, and I just threw it away because ... not for the fact ... I love my father. I really do, and I have a great connection with him now, but then I didn't know who that was. There was ... When you said a father, it was nothing but question marks in my head.

Layla: In my school, on the first day of school we did certain activities where we could connect with the other people in the class, so it was like activities where we got to stand on one side of the classroom if you had this type of situation going on. What I realized was they had a question about if you have somebody that's in jail, and we did that. And I got to see that a lot of other people at my school besides me had a parent or family member that was incarcerated. It was very helpful. It made me feel more comfortable in the area I was in.

Angela: So my disengagement in school I think was very easy to fall under the radar. I was a very well behaved student that just didn't go to class ever. I was chronically absent, and I didn't ever do my work. And I've reflected on this quite a bit that there were many signals that could have indicated that I may have been a student that needed extra supports, but I never had any teacher reach out to me. And I definitely did not feel comfortable reaching out to any teacher.

Tanya Krupat: Really I think there's a few things that if teacher can convey to any child, any child period, but especially children with incarcerated parents, just letting them know that they're not alone and that this is not their fault. No matter what happened, it's not the child's fault, and that this experience does not have to limit their future in any way and that there is support for them. And then I think again with young children, you want to ask them about the meaning that they make of things that are happening so that you can kind of correct misunderstandings. If they think bad people go to jail, that's where bad people go, so their mama's bad. You want to have that conversation that your mom made a mistake, but she is not bad and, by extension, you're not bad. And those are really important to find out what the child thinks is happening, which can be very different from the caregiver, the explanation of what happened, so we really need to ask questions and then listen to the meaning that children are making of it.

Bettina Brown: When we talk about community helpers and we talk about the police officers, I always explain to my preschoolers that a police officer is a guy or person that comes and get the bad guy. And now that I'm aware of the situation and that it could be preschoolers in my class who have a parent that's in prison, I don't want to necessarily call their parent a bad guy. So now I would revise it, and I'll tell them the police is a person that comes to help make sure that the rules are being implemented and that they keep the place safe. So it's kind of like ... I try to be more mindful of the situation and rearrange the words so I'm not making any of my students feel that any parent or anyone they related to is a bad guy necessarily. It's they just broke some rules, and when you break rules, there's

consequences. So I'm learning to not use "bad guy." I'm learning to just explain that when you break rules, sometimes you have to have consequences to it.

I don't know how many classrooms have it, but I think it's very necessary to have books that's age appropriate for students to go back and read in their spare time or when they go to the library and that explains certain situations like a parent being incarcerated to kids so they can see that this is really happening. I don't have to be ashamed about it. Other people are dealing with this, and it will help them be more knowledgeable.

Ann: Everybody in the school district should participate in any training that the school district does. That includes the bus driver and the receptionist in the office because those are often the front-line people, the people that see the kids, that say things to the kids that they may or may not really understand would have an impact on kids. And sometimes that's difficult for school districts because they want to just train the social workers or the school counselors in this issue, but the teachers really need it too and so do all the auxiliary staff.

So I think that there are also policy discussions and decisions that school administrators as well as teachers need to be aware of for children impacted by the justice system. One of them is that many children have to move when a parent becomes incarcerated. They very often will move in with relatives. Most often it's fathers who are incarcerated because that's the vast number of incarcerated parents, and most of those kids are cared for by their mothers but not all. Most of the mothers move somewhere in with a relative and take their children when income is not going to support maintaining the housing that they had. So I would say from the work that we do, probably three-quarters of kids have to move somewhere at some point within a year that a parent becomes incarcerated. Sometimes that's to a new state. Sometimes it's to just across town. Sometimes it's just to a new apartment. And I think schools need to be aware of that. I think administratively they can check to see if the McKinney-Vento laws about homelessness will apply to these kids because they do in some specific circumstances, and that means that they would not have to change schools.

Angela: I think if I had access to a school counselor, it definitely would've been helpful. I think if there had been at any moment in high school where there was an adult who had taken some interest in me and just recognized that there was something going on and tried to dig into what was going on, I would've been very receptive to that.

Speaker 6: Another person who did motivate me when it first happened was my father, and when he used to call, I was depressed. I was sad. And he used to tell me like, "I'm here. I'm not dead, and I'm paying dues for the family. And that's just how life goes. There's ups. There's downs, and we just have to take it day by day. There's nothing to be sad about. I'm okay. I'm living. I'm breathing. I'm healthy. I'm able to speak to you. We're all okay." So, he made me feel like if he was there and he was okay, there's no reason I should be here, and I'm not.

- Layla: When I'm upset about ... After the visits, when I'm upset at school and thinking about my father becomes a distraction, they usually ... I usually get in trouble. They send me to the dean's office, and when that first happened, my dean, she asked me if there was anything going on at home before she actually gave me a consequence or call my mom or something. She actually tried to understand where I was coming from.
- Angela: I definitely think that if teachers or if a school as a whole made proactive steps in normalizing what it's like to be a young person that has an incarcerated parent or an incarcerated family member, I think it would have gone a really long way in making me feel more comfortable in talking about what my experiences were and what was happening.
- Kharon: I guess just basics a teacher should know is just a student's background. Everyday life, what they're going through. Trying to keep in contact with their parents, see what's going on at home. Probably, I don't know, just trying to figure out the student, their story, try to talk to them even if that student doesn't open up right away because I know that's how I am. It takes some time. Start slow.
- Jalon: Anyone is ... Any of these schools are really aware of the impact that they could have with children with incarcerated parents, and I don't think ... I think that's only because they're not educated on how many students actually go through this type of thing. I honestly feel if they knew that this many people were actually affected by it, I feel like they would definitely change their language and the way they talk about certain topics and the way they talk to certain people about certain topics.
- Kharon: My advice would be just to stay strong. I know it's not easy, but just know there's always a support system out there. It's probably not easy to find, but if you have the right resources, I feel like everything would be all right. Support, support. That's all I ever preach.
- Layla: To know that it's not your fault and don't be ashamed of telling other people what you're going through because you don't know everybody's story, so you might not be the only one that is going through this situation.
- Jalon: You might be going through something that someone else is going through, and they're probably afraid the same way you are.
- Narrator: Creating bonds and relationships with peers and trusted adults like you may help protect these youth from some of the negative effects of having an incarcerated parent. Regardless of your role in the school building, you have the capacity to influence policy and practice to better address these students' specific needs. On behalf of youth with incarcerated parents, you are asked to commit to being a powerful and trusted adult for these students.

