

# Tip Sheet for Mentors: Supporting Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

www.YOUTH.gov/COIP

Mentors can play an important role in addressing the needs of children of incarcerated parents. Mentors are caring adults who work with youth as positive role models in a formal or informal way, offering consistent guidance and support. Youth connect with mentors through youth-serving organizations, including community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, businesses, and after-school programs. Mentors can help improve outcomes for the children of incarcerated parents by using research-based practices and effective supports.



## How Can Mentors Support Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent?

Mentors can **build a trusting relationship** by participating in various activities with the child of an incarcerated parent.

### *Establish Understanding*

- Recognize that children of incarcerated parents may have difficulty trusting new adults. Because many have suffered a traumatic and sudden separation from their parent, they may be slow to trust new adults in their lives for fear that these people could also leave.
- Sign up for a mentoring commitment only if you know you can stay involved for the designated period of time. You may want to establish clear expectations with your mentee for how frequently you will see him or her.
- Learn from your mentor organization, the family, or the caregiver, whether the child knows the parent is incarcerated, how the child is coping with the parent's incarceration, and what the status of the relationship is between the child and the caregiver.
- Recognize that young people who have an incarcerated parent face different realities regarding their situation, ranging from not knowing about the incarceration to having witnessed an arrest, and wondering whether it is their fault. Reinforce that the incarceration is not their fault.
- Understand that it is the youth's decision to share details about their parent's absence. It is best not to ask. They may choose to tell you, but it is not important to the mentor/mentee relationship.

### *Develop the Relationship*

- Take the time to learn about each other by talking about interests, family, and other topics based on your mentee's comfort level. While getting to know the youth, be aware of potential sensitivities when talking about families. It is not necessary to avoid the topic of having an incarcerated parent, but be sensitive and avoid making assumptions.

## Reminders

- Every family's experience is different. Some children lived with their incarcerated parent before their parent's incarceration and others did not. Some children had a close relationship with that parent (regardless of whether they lived together) and others may not have. It is important not to make any assumptions.
  - Be aware of what researchers call the "conspiracy of silence." Sometimes caregivers instruct children not to discuss the situation with anyone, for fear of the stigma and shame associated with incarceration. Children, too, may worry about people judging their parent. However, not understanding or not being able to talk about the situation can also be a source of stress for children. Sometimes the silence around the situation can become an inadvertent cause of shame. It is important for mentors to understand this dynamic and to signal to their mentees that they can be trusted and will not judge the child or their parent.<sup>1</sup>
  - Keep in mind that a parent's crime or the fact that he or she is incarcerated does not indicate what kind of parent that individual was before incarceration, nor does it necessarily speak to a child's relationship with that parent. Further, it is not a sign of the type of parent someone will be after release.
- Identify objectives for the mentoring relationship, preferably focused on the mentee's goals and growth, possibly through shared interests.
  - Spend time doing activities that interest the child and expose him or her to new things and places (e.g., sports, games, arts, crafts, field trips to museums) while being sensitive to how your mentee might feel when out of his or her comfort zone and in unfamiliar surroundings.
  - Share stories and information about your own life experiences, including successes and challenges experienced along the way. If relevant, you may share your own experiences with having an absent parent, but keep in mind that having an incarcerated parent may be a different experience than other kinds of absence.



Mentors can **help youth maintain their relationship** with their incarcerated parent after learning the mentee's, parent's, and caregiver's wishes regarding communication and the relationship.

- Help your mentee understand that a parent's incarceration does not have to be the end of the relationship between him or her and the absent parent.
- Understand the barriers your mentee may face in maintaining or building a relationship with their incarcerated parent. These may include finances, communication, visitation/transportation, time commitments such as education and employment, and the desires of the incarcerated parent and/or caregiver.
- Facilitate simple and inexpensive ways to foster the relationship.
  - Help youth coordinate with their parent specific days and times for phone calls, given facility rules and policies.
  - Help your mentee communicate with the incarcerated parent through letters, cards, or creative activities to keep the parent informed about the mentee's life (e.g., drawings, photos, a collage of pictures about academic and extracurricular achievements that can be mailed or emailed to the parent). Provide the child with a box of stationery or notecards and postage, as allowed.

- Become informed about the visitation process so you can help your mentee prepare for any potential visits to the incarcerated parent by sharing what to expect (e.g., going through security procedures, long drives and long waits, talking through a window or via videoconferencing, leaving food and personal items in the waiting area, dress codes, and lists of contraband).
- Anticipate that visits may be difficult for the youth, even if they were looking forward to the trip. Expect that your mentee may have heightened emotions in the days following a visit. Mentors can help youth express their thoughts and emotions and explain that what they are feeling is normal. Help your mentee talk about the positive aspects of the visit.

## Relationship Resources

Overall Policy of Maintaining Parent-Child Relationships During Incarceration. State of Washington.

<https://www.courts.wa.gov/subsite/mjc/docs/OverallPolicyArgumentsforIncarceratedParents.pdf>

Children of Parents In Jail or Prison: Issues Related to Maintaining Contact. Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh.

<http://ocd.pitt.edu/Default.aspx?webPageID=244>

Children Visiting Incarcerated Parents.

[https://www.dhs.state.or.us/caf/safety\\_model/procedure\\_manual/appendices/ch4-app/4-16.pdf](https://www.dhs.state.or.us/caf/safety_model/procedure_manual/appendices/ch4-app/4-16.pdf)

Children of Incarcerated Parents Library. Visiting Mom or Dad: The Child's Perspective.

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl105-visitingmomordad.pdf>

Children of Incarcerated Parents Library. Jail and Prison Procedures: Information for Families.

<http://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/files/cipl106-jailandprisonprocedures.pdf>



Mentors can **help the youth cope** with having an incarcerated parent by understanding the situation without judgment and then providing assistance, education, and information.

- If necessary and when appropriate, help the child understand the parent's incarceration while honoring the wishes of the parent and/or caregiver. This may include providing or suggesting informative, age-appropriate literature. A variety of books on the topic of parental incarceration have been written for children at different age levels. You can find these books for sale online or at your public library. There are also free resources such as *Sesame Street's Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration*.
- Conduct informal networking in which the young person has opportunities to meet others who can contribute to his or her growth or serve as an inspiration, including other young people with incarcerated parents so youth know they are not alone.
- Bring your concerns to the caregiver and/or the mentoring organization if you feel you have reached your capacity to address a mentee's needs, and consider advocating and researching options for opportunities for the child to speak with a professional counselor about any challenges they might be experiencing.<sup>2</sup>

## Reminders

- Children who have an incarcerated parent are at heightened risk for exposure to substance abuse, mental illness, and inadequate education before their parent's incarceration.<sup>3</sup>
- The risk of children living in poverty or experiencing household instability increases with parental incarceration.<sup>4</sup>
- Parental incarceration is recognized as an adverse childhood experience (ACE); it is distinguished from other ACEs by the combination of trauma, shame, and stigma.<sup>5</sup>
- Youth developmental stages influence the experiences and effects of incarceration on children who have a parent in prison.<sup>6</sup>
  - Ages 2 to 6: separation anxiety, impaired social-emotional development, traumatic stress, and survivor guilt.
  - Ages 7 to 10: developmental regression, poor self-concepts, acute traumatic stress reactions, and impaired ability to overcome future trauma.
  - Ages 11 to 14: rejection of limits to behavior and trauma-reactive behaviors.
  - Ages 15 to 18: premature termination of dependency relationship with parent.

Mentors can **support and help youth prepare for and adjust to** their parent's reentry into their lives, family, and community.

- Recognize and acknowledge that there will be a transition period and the new circumstances may present challenges for the youth, parent, and caregiver. Keep in mind that:
  - A youth might have to adapt to having both parents as caregivers. Differences in parenting philosophies and choices can be sources of stress and conflict for the whole family.
  - A caregiver might have to adjust to co-parenting, which can be challenging after long periods of parenting alone.
  - Possible custody hearings or other proceedings may be difficult.
  - The homecoming may not live up to expectations. The recently released parent may not want a child to have a mentor.
  - The current caretaker may no longer be a child's guardian after a parent's release. This transition could be hard on everyone.



## Mentoring Resources

National Mentoring Resource Center.

[http://www.mentoring.org/program\\_resources/national\\_mentoring\\_resource\\_center](http://www.mentoring.org/program_resources/national_mentoring_resource_center)

Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents. Jarjoura, G.R., et al.

<http://www.ojdp.gov/about/MentoringCOIP2013.pdf>

Mentoring. Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs.

<http://youth.gov/youth-topics/mentoring>



## Support Resources

Supporting Children and Families of Prisoners. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Children's Bureau.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/support-services/prisoners/>

Meeting the Needs of Children With an Incarcerated Parent American Bar Association.

<http://apps.americanbar.org/litigation/committees/childrights/content/articles/spring2012-0312-incarcerated-parents-child-development.html>

How to Explain...Jails and Prisons...to Children: A Caregiver's Guide. California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

<https://www.getonthebus.us/pdf/talking-to-children.pdf>

How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children: A Caregivers Guide. Inside Out Connection Project.

[http://www.ctcip.org/app/download/630784/IOC\\_CaregiversGuide\\_Dec09.pdf](http://www.ctcip.org/app/download/630784/IOC_CaregiversGuide_Dec09.pdf)

Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration. Sesame Street Workshop.

<http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/incarceration#sthash.vbW97npu.dpuf>

## General Resources

Children of Incarcerated Parents. Children of Incarcerated Parents Federal Website.

<http://youth.gov/coip>

FAQs About Children of Prisoners. Prison Fellowship.

<http://www.prisonfellowship.org/resources/training-resources/family/ministry-basics/faqs-about-children-of-prisoners/>



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Jose-Kampfner, C. (1995). Post-traumatic stress reactions in children of imprisoned mothers. In K. Gabel & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Children of incarcerated parents* (pp. 89–100). New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- <sup>2</sup> Christian, S. (2009). *Children of incarcerated parents*. Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures.
- <sup>3</sup> Phillip, S. D., Erkanli, A., Keeler, G. P., Costello, J. E., & Angold, A. (2006). Disentangling the risks: Parent criminal justice involvement and children's exposure to family risks. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5, 677–702.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258.
- <sup>6</sup> Travis, J., McBride Cincotta, E., & Solomon, A. L. (2005). *Families left behind: The hidden costs of incarceration and reentry*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center.

