

Supporting Youth with Incarcerated Parents: For Social Workers

- Narrator:** Social workers have the potential to impact the lives of youth who have or have had an incarcerated parent. Social workers can leverage the youth's strengths and support their resiliency, by assisting them with coping and overcoming the struggles and challenges, including social or emotional, that they may be facing. While recognizing the strengths and needs of these youth and families, it is important to be aware of the experiences that children and youth face as a result of their parent's incarceration. This awareness may assist you in supporting and acting as an advocate for them, to promote better life outcomes.
- 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 experienced parental incarceration.
- Jalon:** That's a very sensitive topic. So, when people call my father, someone that I look to as my best friend, when they say things like that, like, "Oh, he's a convict, a felon," things like that, I do get a little offended by that. I feel like, if they used different terms, someone that was incarcerated, formerly incarcerated person, because these are human beings at the same time.
- Amelia:** I remember one time someone said in class, "I think people who are in prison are evil." And I remember I was shocked, but also not shocked. I was sitting there, but I was also, it felt very personal, obviously, so I couldn't really hold back tears, but I responded to this person in class, and I said, "My father is incarcerated, and I love my father."
- And I remember just this moment where everyone kind of sat in silence, because I think it's okay to theorize about it, or to say, "I read this article," and it's like, okay, that's great, but until you've actually really, personally gone through it, it's a whole different conversation.
- Olu:** I don't want to say it's unwelcome, but it's just not something that people talk about, because, besides it being a hard topic, it's just not a friendly topic, and so, it's kind of like, "Okay, your father's in prison. He must be a criminal, he must be a bad man," so it's not very welcoming. But some of my friends do know, and they're more of my open-minded friends that know.
- 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.

- Christophe B.: People are often times completely unaware of the negative reactions they have when they first find out that a child has a parent who's incarcerated. One thing for sure is that the children, themselves, are very aware of the attitudes that the adults around them have about the issue. Unfortunately, it reflects badly on them, they feel, and it affects their self-esteem and their self-image.
- Bettina Brown: I feel one of the things that people do to students that parents are incarcerated, is they judge them, and sometimes, you don't intentionally judge them, but it could just be in the way you speak, or the way you hold expectations for them.
- Amelia: For me, I think, for people that have biases against those who are imprisoned, I think maybe have you ever met someone who was in prison, or have you spoken with someone, or really dialogued with them? Because when you actually speak with them, you realize they're also people who have gone through many things, maybe more than you could possibly imagine.
- Ann A.: 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.
- Olu: I was home, and so was my whole family, so it's my mom, my dad, my little brother, and my little sister, and we all lived together. A bunch of cops came to the house and they searched it, they sat him down in the living room, and eventually, they took him away, so we were all there.
- Xavier: It was a single mother household, so it wasn't really any other resources, so me and my sister, we would sometimes go to my mother's ex-boyfriend's house. Sometimes, I'd go to my grandmother's house on my father's side, sometimes, my sister, she would go to our grandmother on our mother's side, sometimes we stayed downstairs with the neighbors, who was friends with my mom, like family friends. So, no, we were kind of going everywhere.
- Olu: Well, the biggest change was my father not being at home with all of us, because like I said, before, we were all a close together family, always lived together, no extra family, so it was just usually us, but I definitely did get closer to other family friends because he was gone, and so they kind of stepped in and took the responsibility of being a support system.
- I don't think anything changed in regards to my relationship with my siblings, but in terms of responsibilities, I think I just kind of took on the role of being my mom's support system, and just being her right hand in the event that she needs someone and my father isn't there immediately.

- Tanya Krupat: Different families also manage different levels of truthfulness for the kids, so it's possible teachers or social workers can find out when the kids don't know, and that's another situation for teachers and social workers to respect the family system, but try to work with the caregivers to help them understand why an age appropriate truth really is the best thing for children.
- Kharon: I remember, I was 10 years old, and I seen the mail on the bed, and my mom, she seen that I seen my name on the letter, 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 he told me he was 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.
- Christophe B.: Children will be impacted in a negative way about the fact that they had a parent who was incarcerated, whether it was just suffering very silently from the stigma that's associated with having a parent that's incarcerated, to not really knowing exactly why that parent is not at home. Many parents don't talk about the issue with their children, because they're just worried that if it gets out, that child will be stigmatized.
- Amelia: When my father was arrested, it was in September of 2011, and I didn't end up finding out the day of, because my family actually wanted to keep it from me.
- Melvin Wilson: Honesty, especially when you're dealing with issues of trauma, the biggest thing, the most concerning thing for a child, especially a young child, is that gap of who this person is called parent. And most people would be surprised that if you tell them and that the caregiver, or the social worker, whoever's involved, says, "Your mom's away. She's in a place called a jail or a prison, and she loves you, and she's fine."
- Children are resilient. They have information, they are able to then process that in a very meaningful way.
- Bettina Brown: Growing up as a child, I wish I had maybe a counselor to talk to about my issue of having a dad incarcerated. Being able to talk to my parent about it, just someone who can show me how to express my feelings, instead of keeping it bottled up. I couldn't talk to my mom. My mom pretended like it wasn't happening. We couldn't really tell the teacher, because you were just afraid of being judged by your teachers or your community, or your family, your friends, so everything was a secret.
- Kharon: If I had someone to talk to when I was younger, I feel like some of the paths I took in those few years would have been a little different and better.
- Angela: I think, at that age, I was itching for somebody to just make me feel comfortable to speak about this, because as a teenager, you already are very angsty, and just

riddled with emotions and trying to sort out a lot of things, and if there was some kind of beacon that made me feel that this wasn't a journey that I was going through by myself, and that people have experienced similar things, I would have definitely have that conversation with somebody.

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.

Prince:

Visits. I remember waking up in the morning, you know, just knowing the day before, I'd be so hype because just to see my mom again. Because I know she misses me, so just waking up in the morning, even though I be tired, I just still have the adrenaline inside of me, and when I go see her, she has a big smile, and I know that she's proud to see me, and she's proud of what I'm doing.

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, it's just, it makes you not want to go back. 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, and it's hard to shake that.

You're thinking about it on the ride home, and then the next day, if it's a Sunday, the next day, you have to go to school, and sometimes it takes two or three days just to recover.

Tanya Krupat: 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, and then there's other ways that caregivers and the family, and even teachers, can help maintain the attachment, often by acknowledging the parent, giving opportunities to write letters to the parent, and for caregivers, we strongly advocate having photos of the parent around, so that the physical presence can be felt.

Melvin Wilson: Jails, by definition, are short-term. So, a parent may get locked up for an offense that lands them in jail. By and large, that means that person's not going to be there more than a year, and so they're coming back relatively soon. That still needs to be planning, but the separation is going to be relatively short, so there can be visitation in there.

Rhonda S.J.: I like to involve the parent and caregiver from the beginning of care. When a child is having challenges, I think the important thing to remember is that child is likely not just having challenges in one area of his or her life, but is very likely having problems in other areas, as well.

The parent may be stuck in trying to figure out, "I'm doing everything for this child, yet they're still having trouble." And sometimes, the parent doesn't understand that it may be one parent that's gone, and they're doing everything for the child, but it's not exactly what the child needs. It's not enough.

Melvin Wilson: There's another to piece to this whole issue of visitation that really is important to get out there. Sometimes that's not possible. We're going back to the issue of prisons again. You go into an urban area, mom or dad winds up going to jail, and they're in a prison that's 300 miles away. Economics. That's a barrier for any kind of regular visit. That's a big, big deal, a big problem, because there's not that physical contact or visual contact, especially when you're dealing with a 3, 4, 5 year old child.

Amelia: For me, that really helped, which was 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. This is what you need to fix."

But really, "What are your goals, and where do you see yourself in five years?" And if I was late to class, or if I didn't show up to class, she would find me, somewhere in the school, but she would just follow up with me every day and was consistent, was really consistent. Even if I didn't respond, she'd never give up on me. So, I think, sometimes, it's really difficult to be consistent, especially with young people who are very inconsistent in our own lives.

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 my future mattered, so I didn't make effort, but 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.

Layla: With my counselor being there, stuff that I couldn't really talk to my friends about, or my mom about, I could talk to her about, because she just made me feel comfortable and stuff.

Olu: 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, "I'm here, and 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."

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.

Melvin Wilson: Well, the primary function of a social worker is to assess, is to refer, and is to follow up and make sure that there are the appropriate services available, and that these individuals, the children especially, are linked to these services. I say that very easily that there is a very broad and very complex and very important role for social workers, along that continuum once that parent is incarcerated.

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 include confusion, often guilt, blame, anger, sadness, sometimes abandonment, fear, depends on their situations and who steps in or what their world looks like after the parent isn't there anymore.

Rhonda S.J.: I work with youth in different ways depending on their ages. If it's a child that's five or under, those children typically don't understand exactly what's happening with their parent who is incarcerated. They don't understand why

that parent is away from them, and the only thing that they can kind of reason it out to be, is it's something happened that they did, that caused that parent to be away from them.

For children who are older, say, I don't know, somewhere in that seven, eight range, they begin to understand from either TV or just circumstances in their environment, what is happening and why people get incarcerated, so I believe that's a very different age group in which to work. And you are able to communicate things in a more realistic way.

For youth that are older, I think it's far more important to check in with them with greater frequency. Those youth, teenagers, tend to isolate, they tend to not communicate their feelings. They express themselves via social media and other sources that they may use these days, so it's very important for them to have that one-on-one contact and to understand that this may not feel comfortable, but it is a place where you can come to talk about all the things that you are dealing with.

Melvin Wilson: In the last 10 years or so, there's been a lot of emphasis on reentry, pre-planning, recognizing that there are family reunification issues, there are issues of housing, all those things need to be pre-planned, not when that mother or father is released to the street and then suddenly reunited with their child. There has to be a coming together of resources, but also preparing the parent and assessing the parent.

We do have an actively, almost a moral role in advocating for young children that are vulnerable, that are exposed, that often don't have the support system, and we become very, very pivotal to making sure that they don't fall through the crack.

Kharon: My advice would be just to stay strong. I know it's not easy, but 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 will be alright.

Layla: The only advice I would give to kids that also have a parent or a family member incarcerated is 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's going through this situation.

Angela: Advice that I would give to a young person that has an incarcerated parent is that you don't necessarily have to feel the need to keep this to yourself, and in a lot of ways, keeping this to yourself can overburden you, when you already are probably dealing with so many other things. That if you can find someone to speak to, it's incredibly helpful and I know that there can be a lot of resistance to therapy and counseling, but those are things that were really, really helpful for me.

Jalon: Don't be afraid to speak up. Don't be afraid to voice your opinion. You have a voice. Everyone has a voice. Before I even knew it, I had a voice. It just took some people telling me I had a voice to really realize like, yo, people listen to me. Definitely speak up, because you might be going through something that someone else is going through, and they're probably afraid the same way you are.

Narrator: Even if you have never worked with youth or an incarcerated parent before, your expertise as a social worker enables you to understand how to address the needs of youth and families who are experiencing the challenges of incarceration. Your support and advocacy can make a difference in the lives of children and youth who have an absent parent due to incarceration. These youth deserve the effort you make.