School staff make a difference in the lives of all children, including children of incarcerated parents. For the child with a parent in prison, a safe and supportive school can provide a caring, stable setting offering opportunities for educational, social, and emotional development. The bonds and relationships fostered at school with peers and trusted adults play a vital role in the child's short and long term learning and maturation.

Five Things to Know About Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent

1. Children with an incarcerated parent may be in your classroom. 2.7 million (or 1 in 28) children currently have an incarcerated parent. More than 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their childhoods. Given these numbers, there may be a child in your classroom or school who has an incarcerated parent. Women are a fast growing part of the correctional population (the number of incarcerated women increased at nearly 1.5 times the rate of men between 1980 and 2010). If your student’s mother has been incarcerated, there is an increased likelihood of instability in that student’s home and an increased chance that student may enter foster care or have to move to another caregiver’s home (such as a grandparent).

2. Having an incarcerated parent is recognized as an “adverse childhood experience” (ACE). Exposure to multiple ACEs significantly increases the likelihood of long-term negative behavioral and physical health outcomes. Adding to the trauma, many of these children have witnessed their parent’s arrest. One study of parents arrested indicated that 67% were handcuffed in front of their children, 27% reported weapons drawn in front of their children, and 4.3% reported a physical struggle. Although it is not always the case, trauma often affects a child’s physiological and emotional responses; ability to think, learn, and concentrate; impulse control; self-image; and relationships with others.

3. Children with a parent in prison may be subject to stereotypes and subconscious negative assumptions. People sometimes assume children with an incarcerated parent will engage in criminal or negative activity like their parent. Be careful about making assumptions about behavior, motivation, academic ability, and potential. Research indicates that these assumptions, even when done subconsciously, can have detrimental impacts on educational outcomes.

4. Be sensitive to certain trigger issues. When having conversations about current events, crime, criminals, or the police, be mindful of how children with a parent who has been arrested or incarcerated may feel. Children love their parents, even if a parent did something illegal. Be careful about making statements about parental involvement because Dad may not be there to sign permission slips, or Mom may not be there to help with homework. Across all school settings, pay particular attention to children of incarcerated parents being bullied by peers, and help ensure that they are not subjected to biases or stereotypes.

5. Be aware of what researchers call the “conspiracy of silence.” This conspiracy refers to the fact that many caregivers intentionally do not tell children that their parent is incarcerated, deciding instead to explain the absence by saying the parent is sick, away at work or college, or serving time in the military. For children who know their parent is incarcerated, their caregiver may have instructed them to not discuss the situation with anyone, for fear of the stigma and shame associated with incarceration. The child, too, may worry about people judging their parent. However, not understanding the situation or not being able to talk about it 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 teachers to understand this dynamic.

If a teacher knows that a child has an incarcerated parent, the teacher should be careful not to discuss that information with the child unless confident the child has already been informed. If it appears the child understands the situation and would like to confide in someone, it is important for teachers to signal that they can be trusted, will not judge the parent or the child for loving their parent, and will keep the information the child chooses to disclose confidential.
How Can Teachers Contribute to Positive Outcomes for Children Who Have an Incarcerated Parent?

Teachers can collaborate with the child’s other parent, family member, or caregiver to create a positive school setting for children of incarcerated parents. Collaboration may include:

- Sharing relevant information with caregivers concerning successes and struggles, as well as emotional and behavioral concerns; and
- Becoming aware of community organizations and services available to meet the specialized needs of children with a parent in prison, especially mental health resources.

Teachers can assist children who have an incarcerated parent in reaching their potential and achieving academic and social success by:

- Implementing behavioral and academic supports that enhance the teaching-learning process;
- Engaging in classroom methods and approaches that help students with an incarcerated parent increase their capacities to self-regulate behaviors and develop their academic promise;
- Challenging students with a parent in prison to do their very best academically by providing support and establishing and promoting high expectations for them; and
- Identifying areas of vulnerability and understanding that negative behaviors and absenteeism may be masking anxiety and depression, which can result from childhood trauma.

REFERENCES


RELATED RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING


What Educators and Schools Need to Know When Working with Children with Incarcerated Parents. http://www.spac.k12.pa.us