

HOW DO CHILDREN HANDLE THE INCARCERATION OF A PARENT?

The following information is based upon studies conducted by 18 different researchers over a period of thirty years. Up until 1965, there was very little research available that addressed the impact on a child of having a parent incarcerated. This information appears to be some of the most accurate and current information.

GENERAL:

Parental incarceration (including crime & arrest) “produces a typical series of events in the lives of these children.” The most frequent problems include:

1. School Problems - Aggressive behaviors, truancy, poor academics (low grades) and classroom behavior problems.
2. Behavioral Problems: - Aggression, tension, withdrawal, fighting, hostility and acting out inappropriately .

The majority of children share common concerns and perceptions about their parent's incarceration, including:

1. Worry about the outcome of the case, situation or prison sentence.
2. Uncertainty over whether or not the parent will return.
3. Worry and fear that they will be swept of to prison, too.
4. Uncertain how to adjust to the situation.
5. Do not know what to expect for the future.

Young children, especially, see their parents as being **omnipotent** (all wise/important/powerful). When they witness their parent actually being in a situation of powerlessness or violation, such as arrest and incarceration, they become **very vulnerable** (susceptible to attack or criticism; in a position to receive greater penalties or perceived danger).

It is also not uncommon for children to live in impoverished conditions while their parent is away. This, of course, would increase their personal stress levels.

Often the kids are not allowed to talk or discuss the situation with their care givers. This “imprisons” the child in the sense that they are experiencing forced silence. If they are told to “forget” Mom, it makes the situation even worse. Usually this results in them thinking about her more frequently and increases their tension level.

Negative Consequences of Parental Incarceration

It is common at the time of arrest and during early incarceration for the child to identify the arrest or incarceration itself, as the source of their misery. Over time, most children become angry. According to one researcher, as many as 90% of the children were found to be **oppositional defiant** (resistant to others, particularly authority, rebellious and disobedient.)

The kids typically feel rejected and often will see the parent's absence as voluntary, (e.g., Mom left because she wanted to). They frequently report feelings of **inferiority**, (feeling "less than" others, not as valued), unworthiness and commonly feel a sense of responsibility for the separation. In other words, believe that it was his/her behavior that actually "caused" Mom to come to prison.

The more frequently a parent is arrested or incarcerated, the more difficult it becomes for the child to deal with. The frequency of incarceration, age of the child at the time(s), as well as witnessing the arrest of the parent are all critical factors which influence the adjustment and continued development of the child.

Taking Positive Actions

To offset some of the negative consequences for the children, it is recommended that they have visits **as soon as possible** and **as frequently as possible**. This has proven to contribute to greater emotional well being during the adjustment of separation. The reasons are as follows:

1. The children may be allowed to express their feelings (during the visit).
2. The parent herself is better able to work through her own feelings and thus better able to help the child with his/her own issues.
3. This allows the child to see his/her parent realistically and can relieve fears or fantasies they may have been entertaining in their minds.
4. This allows the parent to model appropriate interactions or behavior(s) for the child(ren) who is acting out or not accepting the authority of the present care giver.
5. Further, it allows maintenance of the existing relationship and encourages greater success when the parent is reunited with her child(ren).

Children who experience infrequent visits may react differently than those who visit frequently or regularly. Typically, however, visiting the parent helps to eliminate feelings of rejection and guilt.

Intervention and treatment are highly recommended for children with an incarcerated parent. It is not uncommon, however, for a child to experience increased stress and anxiety at the onset of treatment. This generally improves over time.

DEVELOPMENTAL EFFECTS UPON CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

Birth to 2 Years of Age: Separation from parent at this age can impair the parent/child bonding which expected to occur at this age. However, the infant's needs can be met by an attentive and loving caregiver. It is very critical that the infant/child make a healthy connection to primary caregiver. Otherwise, the child is likely to suffer from an *Attachment Disorder*. (This will influence and impact the most, if not all, of their future relationships.) The emotions also develop at 10 to 18 months of age, and separation can have a negative impact upon them.

2 to 6 years of age: Toddlers are beginning to recognize that they have a separate identity than parent/caregiver. Therefore they understand the potential for parental absence or loss and this results in *separation anxiety*. (In other words, their sense of security is threatened.) Children are typically able to overcome this through the normal development of autonomy (sense of independence) and initiative (ability to think of or come up with a plan; use of imagination).

At 3 - 4 years, the imagination increases, along with a curiosity and learn and understand about their environment. (The "why" stage.) Have short term memory.

At 5 - 6 years, the conscience and morals (beliefs/value systems) of the child are developing. Imagination and creativity are high! Have strong need for attention, love and acceptance from caregiver. Developing important social skills and beginning of real friendships.

When the parental separation is sudden, traumatic or prolonged, the child may regress and experience Separation Anxiety indefinitely. They may become excessively dependent and fail to develop appropriate and need self-confidence. This may result in different emotional reactions, such as: Increased anxiety; Aggression; Withdrawal.

At this young age, children do not have the developmental skills to process (e.g., to think or understand) frightening experiences. They also have a very difficult time expressing their emotions and are unable to mentally create alternative scenarios. (Think of other possibilities.)

If the parent has been authoritative or overcontrolling at this age, the child's ability to think and act without being urged is stifled. This results in the child having the sense or feeling of being wrong all the time. This will be exaggerated even more by having a parent incarcerated.

Other problems include “over identification with parent” (belief that he/she is just like mom or dad so I’ll be taken away too.)

Survivor guilt is also very common. This is a very real sense of feeling guilty or responsible for what has happened to someone else and remorse that it didn’t happen to him/her.

Forced silence is when the other family members or caregiver refuses to allow the child to discuss the parent or the situation. They may be unwilling to allow the child to ask questions or to express their feelings.

7 to 10 years of age: Critical development of social skills and awareness of others occurs at this age. A main goal at this time is preparing to work with others. Relationships with family, peers and authority which are formed during these stages will impact social skills and future relationships. Important that child develop sense of motivation and accomplishment.

Children faced with parental incarceration at this time frequently experience developmental regressions. (In other words, they backslide.) They experience a very poor self-concept. They often exhibit “*trauma-reactive*” behaviors (act out in response to the emotional shock of the parent’s incarceration.) They also have an impaired ability to overcome future trauma and will have *acute traumatic stress reactions* to future emotional shocks.

Factors which play an important part in the impact are:

- 1) The frequency that the child has been exposed to arrests and/or actual crime.
- 2) Multiple placements (shuffling the child around) has a negative affect. This leads to an increased probability of future delinquency.
- 3) Parents are typically the primary role models at this age. Loss of them due to incarceration is at a critical time. This obligation can be assumed by a reliable and responsible caregiver. Some children may not be as accepting of others at this point though.

Emotional responses include anger, sadness, grief and anxiety. If the child already has poor coping skills, they are far less able to overcome the emotional effects of the trauma. When this occurs (unable to recover), they express emotions through *reactive behaviors*.

Examples of reactive behaviors include: Hyper vigilance (over-guarded/fearful); attention and concentration problems; withdrawal. Any of these problems can lead to school problems, including academics and behaviors. As this is when children’s main channel of work and success is through school, this can have a very detrimental impact upon the child.

Trauma also interferes with the process of learning to control emotions. At this age, kids need to be encouraged to express their feelings, BUT also to control their behaviors surrounding the emotions. This is also a problem for children who are concerned about what others think of them and they do not want to express emotion.)

Children with weak or low self-concept respond poorly to trauma. Trauma weakens self-concept. Repeated trauma has a major cyclical and negative impact.

11 to 14 years of age: Generally the onset of puberty with major physical changes occurring and confusing emotional incidents. Imperative that child have an appropriate and healthy adult to relate to, preferably of the same gender. Although "growing away" from the family, to a certain extent, they require guidance, love, restrictions and consistency. Generally a very confusing time for youth in all matters.

Youth at this time are also learning to delay gratification, work productively with others and developing their abstract thinking. The pattern of their behaviors that they develop at this point are major determinants in the pursuit of future goals.

Often older kids assume the role of an absent parent which is often difficult, especially when they are able to understand that it is the parent's responsibility to be caregiver.

When a children experiences parental incarceration at this stage, it is not uncommon for him/her to completely reject any behavioral limits which are set upon them. There also continues to be a pattern of "*trauma-reactive*" behaviors.

Older children also realize that their parents have willingly or voluntarily engaged in activities which have caused the actual separation. They may questions the parent's love, which is **"The basis upon which they agreed to accept limits upon their behaviors."** [It is typical to "test" limitations in teen years.]

A youth with an incarcerated parent is vapt to reject other adult limitations which may be placed upon them, also. This is not necessarily a value confusion - it is often a reaction to grief and loss.

Often the tenns are unable to participate in acceptable, organized activities due to the acting out of aggressions, lack of social skills and generally "disorganized" behavior. Consequently, they seek other activities which include: lying/stealing; gang affiliation; violent behaviors. These behaviors "allow" them to "survive"; to be successful at something and to feel a part of something. Unfortunately these behaviors typically become compulsive and ultimately destructive.

15 to 18 years of age:

At this age, adolescents are developing a sense of belonging and purpose in their world. Achieving own personal identity. Becoming independent and self-sufficient. Learning to resolve internal and external conflicts and the ability to co-exist in society.

When a parent is incarcerated at this point in a child's life, it often results in a premature termination of dependency upon the parent. (In other words, they still are in need of the care, love and protection provided by parent.) There is also evidence which suggests a greater chance of inter-generational crime and incarceration.

These are also years of crisis and confusion. Those youth who lack positive and healthy coping skills are at a much higher risk for engaging in delinquency. They are more apt to enter the criminal justice system. The long term outcome of maladaptive behaviors is delinquency or adult crime.

General Findings

Of children aged 5 to 16 years, 75% of them were experiencing depression, sleep difficulties, concentration problems and *flashbacks*. The caregivers often describe these kids as being "restless" or "hyperactive".

The children worry about the safety of their moms as well as their own safety. Some will experience a "temporary death" from the separation. Especially when the mom is not emotionally available. The loss and anxiety is very similar to that experienced from the death of a parent.

The children often suffer painful feelings of rejection, loss of identify, anger and guilt. They may develop an increased fear of emotional closeness and an increased sensitivity to later separations. Any **separations which are forced or violent** are the **most traumatic**.

Children often experience threats to parent(s) as being a threat to themselves.

Many times children of offenders tend to have weakened family support systems and have experienced multiple separations and placements.

Often a child believes the separation is final or due to death, and may refuse to speak to Mom on the phone or to believe it is really her.

Children will typically grieve from the separation and may withdraw from others, experience changes in appetite, sleep or activity levels. Commonly agitated, display hyperactivity and other disruptive behaviors.