

Discussion Paper 3

SUPPORTING GRANDPARENTS OR OTHER RELATIVES OR FOSTER PARENTS WHO ARE CARING FOR A CHILD WITH A PARENT IN PRISON

By Sydney Gurewitz Clemens and Wayna Buch,
Co-Chairs (with Fran Roznowski) of the Interest Forum on Children of Incarcerated Parents
of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

NOTE: These papers are written for people who are thinking about/caring for children under ten. We address myself to this group with some confidence; it is where our experience lies (Sydney was the stepchild of a long-term prisoner, Wayna the caregiving parent and grandparent of a child with a parent in prison. Both of us are specialists in Early Childhood Education.) But since the paper are meant to trigger discussion, not to be the final word on the subject, our ideas may have some usefulness to people who have older children to think about. On another subject, these papers are NOT about cases where the child has been abused by the prisoner. That's a whole different subject.

Stages

There are several stages to imprisonment: arrest, pretrial period, trial, imprisonment (including visiting), and release (sometimes including) family reunification. The whole family experiences each of these stages. The issue of loss of parental rights is an important one, and enters into everything... it will be dealt with in a later paper for discussion.

Let us begin by saying that we take off our hats to all who are caring for children because of

incarceration. Know that without your dedication to children, their hardships would be much greater. Every child deserves and needs a stable, nurturing, safe environment and family around him or her if s/he is to grow and develop into a productive self-supporting person. We know this because we've lived it.

Your job as primary caregiver isn't an easy one. But, it is one that makes a positive difference in the life of that child or those children as you bring to your task thoughtful care and love.

Bringing order from chaos

Throughout our lives we go through many transition points that have great impact upon who we are and how we view ourselves. For a young child faced with the arrest and absence of a parent or primary caregiver the impact is immense and the void deafening. The emotional turmoil created by the arrest and incarceration begins to spiral out of control immediately as the family tries to piece together the events that led up to the arrest and their plan for the future. (We'd be negligent if we didn't say here that for some of our families and

children, this chaos is normal. We are not addressing these children in this piece. That requires another thoughtful discussion.)

Invisibility

Often at the time of arrest children become invisible as the focus turns to the person who was arrested. The needs of children are not yet open for discussion because it is a time when families go into survival mode trying to piece together what has fallen apart. Crisis rules the family and decisions made are based on the high of the chaos. Some of these decisions will affect children's lives both immediately and for years to come. The formula goes like this:

arrest+loss+grief+guilt+blame=

WHAT DID I DO WRONG? or
WHAT COULD I HAVE DONE TO STOP THIS
FROM HAPPENING!

This formula leads to what we often see as educators and parents. It adds up low-self esteem, victimization, in ability to stay focused, behaviors

of concern etc. We know this list. We deal with it in our classrooms and in our programs. It is this list that is the problem and issue at hand. What we need is to discuss ways to cope with these problems, solutions that may involve intervention, support and other services.

When the arrest occurs:

If the child is present at time of arrest, the child will be shocked and frightened. Remember the formula. As caregiver you will want to tell the child that it was, indeed, scary and shocking, and you're so sorry that s/he experienced this. The most important thing you can do in this situation is listen to what the child is saying, and find ways to help the child think through what will happen next, how the difficulties he or she is experiencing can be overcome. You may have to help the child understand that the arrest and imprisonment were not his or her fault. Children often have the impression that they've caused what happens around them, and need to be freed of that burden.

Something to hold onto

Children need something to hold on to at this point.

Give them HOPE in the future. Acknowledge feelings. The very young child will need you to give them words that describe their feelings (sad, mad, scared, worried, ashamed) and give them permission to feel those feelings. They are entitled to feel the loss and grief of the situation. Their feelings are no different from the feelings adults are experiencing. They just need to know that they're permitted many ways to get the feelings out. Let the child cry, if s/he can, or say how angry s/he is, or rip up old magazines or a phone book, or run around the block. This is a time to discharge (safely) as much anger and grief as one can. You can provide permission and materials so the child can safely express these feelings.

They will have many questions. Answer them to the best of your ability:

You can explain to the child that his or her mother/father will have a lawyer who will help, and that you are going to make sure the child will be safe, and warm, and protected.

If the child you're caring for saw his or her mother/father handcuffed, you will want to tell

him or her that the cuffs are taken off at the police station. If it has been a long time, you'll want to say that the police will give mom or dad meals. That there's a place to sleep, a place to clean up, a place to go to the toilet. Children will often imagine the worst (a black hole with chained prisoners eating bread and water as they freeze) when frightened, so it's better to help them see the reality, unpleasant as that may be.

Your task

Your task at time of arrest and shortly afterwards is to help the child keep on an even keel, even though one of the strongest supports in his or her life has been removed. It is a hard task. Your own feelings about the person arrested and the reasons for arrest will make it harder, but you can shelter the child only if you help him or her to continue to believe that his or her life will be okay. Save your own anger at the parent (for being irresponsible, or getting in trouble, or bringing this shame upon your family or whatever) for discussion with adult friends, out of earshot of the child. Honor the bond between the child and this parent regardless of how you feel.

You can make agreements with the prisoner about what responsibility s/he will continue to take as a parent. Here's what one very strong family did:

MOM AND DAD SIGNED A CONTRACT

When Emani's dad, Jomo, went to prison, he and his wife Liz signed a sort of contract. Liz promised to take the children to visit him as often as she could, and to pay for the expensive telephone calls. They also agreed to make all important decisions about the children together. Jomo promised to take responsibility for what he had done, and to ask the children's forgiveness. He would always tell the truth, listen and ask questions and remember the children's birthdays without prompting.

To see the rest of this very good article, go to:

<http://www.childrensworld.org/wcpswe/2004/nominerade/USA/engelska/emani2.asp>

You and the prisoner can make your own agreements, even if you're not spouses. What will the prisoner agree to, what will the caregiver agree to? This kind of clear agreement makes

things go better for all, especially the children who are, as you know, very sensitive to discord between the people they love.

Pretrial:

If the parent is out on bail, this is a good time to try to make plans for the possibility that you will be taking over the care of the child or children.

This is a hard subject, but your strong point is that IF you do come to the task, you want to do it well, and that will be best accomplished if the parent talks to you a lot about what s/he wants for the child.

If the parent isn't out on bail you will have set up new routines for your family which now includes the imprisoned parent's child or children. If the child is over three you will want to know from him or her in words what's going on in their mind. You will need to make a decision about whether to take the child to the trial (for many children over 6 or so, this will actually lessen anxiety) but you *must* say something; your own tension will communicate itself to the child (or children) and should be explained. Continue to be honest with children.

Nothing else works.

Trial:

No child should go who doesn't want to go, but children should be asked. They should be told, whatever their decision, that they may change their minds.

Hope:

It is important to people to keep hope alive. Try posting this on the wall, and reading it often with the child:

*Keep a green branch in your heart
and the little bird will come again*

keeping the child connected with his or her parent
Imprisonment, and the question of children
visiting:

Remember the formula it once more comes to life at
this point.

As the caregiver YOU have all the power over
whether the imprisoned parent continues to be
available to his or her child or not. If you don't

take the child to visit, or arrange for someone else to do so, the relationship will be cut off.

No matter how angry you are, remember that the child has a right to be parented by his or her mother or father, and do your best to arrange visiting, unless the child doesn't want to go. Be careful that your anger at the inmate doesn't influence the child's decision.

ask for help!

If you cannot, yourself, travel to the prison, ask community organizations where you can find a volunteer to help you... churches sometimes arrange this service, or fraternal organizations, or Friends Outside.

If you need more help finding this kind of assistance, email us at sydney@eceteacher.org and we'll see what we can do to help.

What you can expect:

Children may regress after their visits in prison, may need more babying for a bit, or more

reminding about various behaviors. This is normal and natural... we respond to stress by babying ourselves. If the child's response to visiting is worrisome, ask a mental health professional for help. The child's school can help you find inexpensive or free mental health services, or the social worker or childcare provider can, too.

If the prisoner seems to be making unreasonable demands of the child during visits you may need to be very clear with him or her: Jimmy can't deal with your asking him to do such-and-such during visits, and I have to pick up the pieces after visits. So please stop it!

Communications:

Today we have many modes of communication. Phone calls and mail are just a couple of ways to help children stay connected to incarcerated parents. Some organizations offer phone cards to help defer expenses of the call.

Books on Tape

Read to Me International, a non-profit organization offers Books on Tape. The incarcerated parent

tapes him-self or herself reading a children's book for the child, and the tape and a book are sent to the child. I have heard many great stories of how this program has helped families stay connected. Their website is

www.readtome.com

A Big Difference

The lives of the outside parent and the inside parent are entirely different... the outside parent experiences taking on new challenges and becoming stronger, while the inside parent experiences enforced helplessness and a longing for some way to be making a difference in the world.

Release (possibly including) family reunification: These differences are very pronounced at release, when all the family may have been (foolishly) expecting everything to be better. Instead, the parent who has been outside finds the other parent making decisions which interfere with the way the free members of the family have been functioning; and many families do not survive as families and cannot manage, even if they desire to do so, to re-unify.

You will want to talk about some of these differences as preparations for the prisoner's release, and the importance that the child (or children) not be caught in the middle. Even so, it will take you by surprise. Sydney remembers: Short weeks after my stepfather's arrest, I got a car with him and my mother, my husband and our two children, one a tiny baby. I said, we'll have to stop off and get milk for the baby and my stepfather said, If we have time. He was unable, yet, to focus outside of his own needs, and didn't see how clearly the baby's needs superseded his own.

What if I don't intend for us to live together again?

If you don't intend to live with the other parent after release, it is best to make that decision known well before release. That way the prisoner has time to work through the loss with the help of the prison counselors or staff. Talk to someone about how best to approach the situation prior to having the discussion. It is best not to let your intent be known in the heat of an argument. It is

only fair to the prisoner to choose a time when you both can discuss it openly.

You will still want to arrange for visiting between your children and their other parent. Do this in a way that is comfortable for you, or it won't work. If you have some lack of trust, the visit needs to be with either you or someone you trust present to monitor it. That may not continue to be necessary, but the job of a family is to keep everyone from high anxiety or fear, on an even keel, and even, if possible, having some fun.

You have a big task. It can make all the difference to the children in your care, if you do it well. Call on others (call on us) to help, if you feel up against it. We'll do what we can, but at the very least, you won't feel isolated.

This is the third in a series of discussion papers on the subject of Children of Incarcerated Parents. The questions were raised at the inaugural meeting of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Interest Forum (CHIPS) of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). You can join the Interest Forum, get future discussion papers, share your experiences or otherwise support young children with parents in prison by getting in touch with Sydney at 415 586 7338 or sydney@eceteacher.org. The discussion papers can be found also on Sydney's website: <http://www.eceteacher.org>

copyright Sydney Gurewitz Clemens and Wayna Buch, 2005