

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS IN GENERAL OF YOUNG CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMATIC EVENTS?

HOW ARE THEY SPECIFIC TO CHILDREN WITH PARENTS IN PRISON?

GRIEF

A child with a parent in prison is a child who is grieving a loss. Young children may lack the language to describe what they are feeling, may lack information about what's going on that would help them find balance, may be isolated from their peers (nobody else has a parent in jail) and may feel that they belong nowhere.

NEEDS

These grieving children, who have been traumatized by parental arrest, trial, and/or incarceration need the same things so-called normal children need—to feel safe, loved, competent, connected with the community, to play, to laugh, to relax. They need to be given ample avenues of expression in the arts, in vigorous outdoor play, in music, in dance... so that each child finds some satisfying way of discharging the accumulated tensions and angers that come with having a parent in prison and the consequent disruption of childhood.

They have the same needs, but their ability to *help themselves meet those needs* has usually been impaired.

TRUST

It is harder for them to trust others:

How can I manage with my parent gone?

Why did my parent leave me?

I must be a grownup now, since there's a hole in the family.

I'll have to do grownup things that are very hard. No more kid stuff for me.

It is harder to accept a new primary caregiver

What if this person, also, suddenly leaves me?

It is harder to build self-esteem

Who could respect and love somebody like me who hasn't even got her/his parent staying home and taking care of me? I must be awful.

HOW TO HELP?

Adults who want to help the children will want to listen carefully for clues to the nature of the child's experience of loss. Their needs are the same, fundamentally, as the needs of children who have survived the death of someone close, or a fire, a hurricane, a tsunami etc. Caring adults will then want to provide words or information, introduce the child to peers who share the experience, and to locate or establish a place where the child will know he or she belongs. They will want to provide regular, frequent places, times and equipment for expression in the arts.

UNIQUE PROBLEMS:

Children with parents in prison have to deal with many of the following:

secrets

sudden poverty

resentment by relatives who suddenly have to care for them

relocation

foster care

depression

ACCESS TO THEIR PARENTS

They either are cut off entirely from the parent or have arduous, emotionally draining visits (often these visits are over long distances and have all the travel-wearying aspects in addition to being through clanging gates, and around armed guards.) The visiting room may be completely bare of things that would occupy the child while mother visits with father.¹ The visit often involves no contact whatsoever, or only a quick hug at meeting and departure, instead of the warm physical contact necessary to very young children in their primary relationships. Advocates should call for prison visiting rooms where contact between parent and child is allowed. Visits through glass are hard on everybody, especially young children who get so much of their comfort from touch.

¹Children with *mothers* in prison are much less likely to visit them. Evidently mothers are more likely to take children to visit incarcerated fathers than vice-versa. Also, mothers, on the average, are 160 miles from home, whereas fathers, on the average, are just over 100 miles from home.

KINDS OF SUPPORT NEEDED

These children need adults to listen to their concerns and fears, to give them honest and mature explanations and to help them deal with very troubling emotional knots. They often receive none of these supports. They are told lies which undercut their own sense of reality: "Your daddy is working in another state;" "mom's in college" or she's on vacation." All of these attempts to protect the children create more anxiety:

Why didn't he tell me?

Why didn't she take me with her?

Why do I feel so alone?

ADVOCACY NEEDED

There is no state in the United States where these supports are provided to the child of a prisoner as a matter of right. The children *do time* right along with their parent. So the children need advocates, to help them get what they need. Only if their needs are met and their lives wisely supported will they beat the odds of ending up prisoners themselves (becoming an adult offender is about 7 times more likely among children of prisoners than in the general population.)

Continuity is a basic support in our lives, and is often lost and lost again and again to the child of a prisoner. If, for example, a child goes into the foster care system and has multiple placements before age 18, there is no continuity and, quite possibly, no sense

of *home*. If a child goes to live with grandmother she or he is likely to have to move again when grandmother's health, patience or competence fails.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Often the children pin their hopes on a golden time in the future when "daddy (or mommy) will come home." The expectation that all will be perfect when daddy or mommy comes home is dangerous and leads to many children experiencing yet another betrayal. A prisoner who comes home can disrupt the system that his or her spouse had created during imprisonment, and this can lead to anger and be frightening to a child. So life was hard when daddy was in jail, and it's hard in new and frightening ways when he comes home? What's the point? Why behave well?

WHAT'S NEEDED?

Every child in this predicament should have access to a skilled caseworker who works with the child's unincarcerated caregiver(s) to meet the child's needs. Virtually none of today's American children with a parent in prison receive anything like this. And all of us need to advocate on their behalf for their sakes and for our own; a community that neglect seriously burdened children cannot at the same time be valid, sound, and wholesome.

This is the second in a series of discussion papers by Sydney Gurewitz Clemens 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

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