

DISCUSSION PAPER 1:

3-7 YEAR OLD CHILDREN WITH A PARENT IN PRISON: WHAT DO TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW?

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QUESTION:

I'm a teacher educator. How do we prepare a teaching force to work with families and children of prisoner?

IT'S A HARD SUBJECT

It is crucial that teachers be willing to discuss the very hard subject of *parent in prison* with children. Many teachers shy away from this discussion, mostly saying "I don't know what to say.... I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing." As a teacher educator, you can open dialogue with teachers about rising to meet these children's needs.

AND THERE IS AN EXCEPTION

(NOTE: The case of the child who has been the victim of the prisoner is rare, and what follows should NOT be used with such a child. You will want a professional counselor or therapist to work with you on what to say to this child...but you can safely indicate being on his/her side while you're seeking such counsel.)

IT CAN DEFEAT SCHOOL LEARNING IF IGNORED

Teachers need to realize that a child with terrible experiences and a shaky support system isn't about to learn well. The teacher can't sidestep the obligation to help the child find a comfortable way to proceed with his/her growth and development, despite the trauma of parental arrest, trial, and incarceration.

TALK WITH THE CHILD

A teacher will need to be sympathetic and open to talking about what's on the child's mind.

KEEP IT PRIVATE

This kind of conversation should be private. In childcare or nursery programs private time for private conversation can be found when the children are on the playground or choosing their activities. In primary grades, this may mean asking the child to hang out with you during recess or before or after school. Or having a walk during lunchtime.

SHOW YOU'RE ON THE CHILD'S SIDE

What to say? It's just about always ok to open a conversation with: ***"It must be hard to have your (daddy, mommy, brother, uncle, etc.) in jail."*** Said sympathetically, this demands no response, and sometimes no response will come. In which case, mark your appointment book for three or four weeks from

now, and say it again. You will want to keep this door open.

ALIGN YOURSELF WITH THE CHILD

Why say this? It says to the child: I know about this situation and am aligned with you... I'm on your side, wanting to help you get through this...you can feel free to talk to me about it if you like. I'm not judging you harshly, in fact, I'm judging that it's a hard situation for you and you might need support.

If the child does reply, you can have that conversation. Remember, your job is to be aligned with the child. If you can show him/her that you're available for conversation and sympathy, you'll have begun an important connection.

Look for a way to help the child express feelings
As the child becomes comfortable discussing this with you and a rapport is in place, you might want to ask:
"What's the hardest thing about having _____ in prison?"

If the answer is "I miss him/her" then you can help the child make pictures or dictate or write things to send by mail. Here's a group experience which will be helpful to many of the children in your class:

OTHERS IN YOUR GROUP WILL ALSO BENEFIT FROM THIS LESSON:

I MISS MY DADDY

(A lesson plan for young children including one or more with an incarcerated parent.)

Adult: I was talking with my friend the other day, and she said she was missing her son, who went to live in another city. Does anyone here miss anybody?

Call upon children other than your target child(ren) and let them talk about the people they miss. Validate that it is painful to love someone who isn't present. Ask them what they might do to help themselves feel better. Make a list as ideas are generated. Ask other children to respond..."Jimmy says he misses his granny who lives in Missouri. Who has a suggestion about what he can do that might help?"

Include the target child(ren) in the discussion. If they don't identify why they miss their relative, you mustn't, either. You can generalize if they do... "yes, some parents go to jail and we miss them very much." Do not emphasize or otherwise draw special attention, just honor this missing as you have honored the others. Now, everyone hold hands and send love to the people you miss.

If children haven't generated these ideas, you might want to offer one or more:

You could write a letter to the person

You could make a drawing for the person

You could tell your friend at school about that person

You could tell the teacher something and s/he would write it down.

After the discussion, provide children who want to do these things with what they need to get started. Next day, or later that day, review if doing these things helped. Leave the chart up, so the children can be reminded of things they can do. If the children are preliterate, put icons with the words to assist their recall.

SOMETIMES YOU CAN HELP, OFTEN YOU CANNOT

The hardest thing about supporting children with parents in prison is that you will generally want to get the parent back into the home to be with his or her child...and that's almost always beyond your power.

But your inability to free the parent should not interfere with your ability to do what you can for the child.

As you continue to work with this child, you'll identify other needs you can help with. And some that you

can't help with. You need to take your own feelings of inadequacy out of the conversation (be sure to talk with your adult friends about them...don't let them fester in silence).

When you can be of no practical help, you can still assure the child that *you know it's hard, and you know the child is strong enough to get through it.* This is also what the parents, at home and in prison, should come to believe. You can help them get there by showing them the child's capability, and by searching with them for additional resources (counselling, after-school programs, art or music schools etc.) when they are indicated.

SECRETS AND LIES

You should know that often children are told that their parent has "gone on vacation" or "got a job in another town" or other untrue stories, and that usually the child knows anyway. *This kind of lie undermines trust between the child (already traumatized by parental absence) and the new caregiver, and should never be supported.* Teachers should be aware that children who are surrounded by secrets of this sort are at terrible risk of withdrawing (this is likely with girls) or of exploding (this

more likely with boys.)

WHAT DO I DO IF THE PARENT SAYS NOT TO DISCUSS IT?
A teacher friend, reading a draft of this paper, wrote to me: I'm not sure how the teacher is to accommodate caregiver requests to not talk about the subject. Should the teacher let the primary caregiver know about the conversations? Before or after they take place? What does one say to parents that are adamant about not speaking to the child on this subject? Should permission be sought to invite the child to talk if s/he wishes? How does the teacher approach the adult?

I responded that the teacher should do in this situation what s/he does with a child of divorced parents or a child who has had a death in the family. Some of this has to do with the community context: are teachers expected to be emotional supports to children? Is the family keeping a close check upon what happens at school? I wouldn't make a big thing of the fact that I was being available to the child for discussion of his or her feelings about the parent in prison... nor would I keep it a secret.

Certainly, if the primary caregiver has asked the teacher to refrain from discussing the parent's

imprisonment the teacher will need to respect the request, but that doesn't mean the teacher won't do what the child needs. The teacher should invite the appropriate resource person (school social worker, Head Start family worker, principal etc.) to help the parent see that the child will suffer from any secret about this matter. First of all, the child probably already knows; children hear what's going on around them. And second, whenever the child does find out, she or he will mistrust the adults who have lied to them. As a culture we have learned that adopted children grow up best if they know they were adopted. The best practice is not to lie to children.

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

As a teacher or teacher educator you need to know that there are a lot of children with parents in prison, and virtually no programs designed to help them through their troubles. There aren't national statistics at this time, but the figure was set at 3% of American children several years ago, and more people are in prison each year, so we're above that now. The children rarely have adequate support. The absolute number is over a million and a half.

You also should know that children sometimes are present at arrest, sometimes are left with no

supervision when a parent is arrested, often are thrown into inappropriate or strange situations at time of parents arrest: juvenile detention centers, foster homes, wherever, and are always seriously impacted by parental incarceration. They have high incidences of depression, acting out, regression, and more.

You should know that most often, if the caregiving parent is arrested, the child moves from his or her home to another, often with the grandparent who hadn't counted on raising more children in middle or old age.

And you should know that generally the economic situation of the child declines, and that possessions of importance to the child often are lost in the transition from home to the new setting.

You should know that imprisoned fathers are, on the average, more than 100 miles from their children. And imprisoned mothers, because there are fewer women's prisons, are on the average 160 miles away. This means that children have to be brought far by someone who cares very much, if they are to see their imprisoned parent and maintain that important

connection. It also helps to explain why incarcerated mothers have substantially fewer visits with their children. (There may be other reasons as well. As a society we are deeply ashamed and embarrassed by our women in prison.)

FACTS AND STATISTICS

Finally, you should know that unless conditions improve, seven of each ten children with parents in prison will, themselves, become prisoners. Nell Bernstein, in a forthcoming book from The New Press, tells us:

The children of offenders are five times more likely than others to end up in prison themselves. One in ten will land behind bars before they reach age eighteen. Local studies have mapped more specific patterns. Researchers in Oregon, for example, followed 206 boys from high-crime neighborhoods from 1983 to the present. . . . By 18, fifty percent of the boys whose father had been arrested and 80 percent of those whose mother, or both parents, had been arrested had themselves been arrested twice or more. (By way of comparison, 20 percent of boys from the same neighborhoods who had not experienced parental arrest had been arrested twice or more themselves). Another study in Sacramento, California found that among nine- to 12-year-old children who had been arrested, 45 percent had an incarcerated parent.

CONCLUSION

This challenges each and every teacher to help the child find the tools necessary to evade this danger. By being open, allying with the child, and being honest, you can be a guide toward a different future.

You can be an island in the raging sea that surrounds a child with a parent in prison, and I encourage you to find the strength it will take to be that island, that person who provides rest, resources and renewal for the child.

This is the first 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