



Fostering a Child Whose Parent Is in Jail or Prison

There may be as many as two million children in the U.S. who have one or more parents in prison or jail. That's close to two out of every 100 children, according to a review from Wright & Seymour, 2000. Many of these children live with the other parent or with extended family members during the parent's period of incarceration.

But many of these children also find themselves in the foster care system. One factor is the exponential growth of women in prison and the number of single-parent households.

The female prison population grew 757 percent between 1977 and 2004. Most of the increases in female imprisonment can be traced to the "war on drugs." More women are being sent to prison for drug offenses. According to the Women's Prison Association, 74 percent are incarcerated for non-violent crimes.

There are also significant racial disparities in the prison population. African Americans are disproportionately represented in the prison population, just as they are in the foster care population.

The events that bring children to foster care—including the very act of being removed from one's family—create emotional upheaval in most children who enter the system.

Additionally, most studies conclude that the incarceration of a parent engenders a unique grief which compounds that of entering foster care.

Children of incarcerated women are more likely to be adopted and less likely to qualify for family preservation services. It is difficult enough for women to establish themselves in an apartment, find employment, and participate in a community let alone try to rebuild a family with their reunited children.

Here are some suggestions for you to help your children cope:

- ❖ It is important to examine your own feelings about criminal activity and drug abuse. How can you help both the child in your care, and his or her parent if you find it difficult to

To listen to the *Broken Bonds: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Mothers* audiocast, go to the following website:

<http://www.about.chapinhall.org/conferences/urban/feb2008/presentations.html>

accept something the parent has done? Would it help to talk to a trusted pastor or rabbi, your case worker, or a counselor to come to grips with your own feelings?

- ❖ Children whose parents are incarcerated are likely to be grieving. They may:
 - Identify with the parent in jail and feel guilt and shame about the crime.
 - Carry a social stigma and find themselves treated differently at school, in the church, or in the community.
 - Have intrusive thoughts about the prison or jail where the parent now lives
 - View their future as uncertain, and hinge their emotional state on court dates and outcomes which are often slow.
 - Have flashbacks to the traumatic arrest
 - Experience embarrassment, fear, and anxiety.
 - Be angry or in a state of hyper-vigilance.
 - Show signs of sadness, regression, or eating or sleep disorders.
- ❖ Talk with your children in age appropriate ways about these feelings and reactions.
- ❖ Prepare yourself to answer some difficult questions. It will help you to respond truthfully and appropriately if you give some forethought to what they may ask. Some of the issues you may want to address are:
 - Why is the parent in prison
 - What happened.
 - What will happen next.
- ❖ It is important to reassure your children that the parent did not leave because of something they did.
- ❖ Finally, honor and preserve the child's connection to the parent in prison.

Parents Who Are Incarcerated, continued

Visits between children in foster care and their parents maintain important family relationships, give social workers a chance to assess and document birth family progress, and are strongly tied to successful family reunification. This is often a daunting task for foster parent, but here are some guidelines that may help:

- ❖ Talk to your case worker about visiting the parent.
- ❖ Learn the visitation regulations in the jail or prison you will be visiting. Find out if there will be face-to-face contact, or if the child will have to view her parent with glass separating them and talk on phones; find out if there will be metal detectors or body searches and if the child is allowed to bring any mail or gifts.
- ❖ Visit the prison or jail on your own before you bring the child. It will help you to deal with reactions which you may not want to display in front of the child who is already afraid and anxious about the experience of visiting mom or dad in jail.
- ❖ Tell the child what to expect at the visit in age-appropriate ways. Let them know that there may be only one hug, that they may not be able to bring anything to the parent, or that may long lines and time limits on the visit.
- ❖ Some jails and prisons have special family rooms and accommodate children in special ways. Make the appointment ahead of time with the prison to find out about any special accommodations which are made for children. A foster parent tells the story of a jail that videotaped inmates reading children's books and gave the videos and copies of the books to the child's family. The child could read the books at home along with the foster parent while they watched the parent reading the books on video tape.
- ❖ Some children want to see their parents and some will have a difficult time dealing with their parents' incarceration. However, most studies indicate that it is important for children to maintain as much contact as possible, and that reunification is more likely to be successful if that contact has been maintained.



Resources

The Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center has the following books available to borrow:

[Children With Parents in Prison Wish You Were Here](#)

Resources used for this article include:

Family Ties Through Prison Walls

<http://www.connectforkids.org/node/2916>

Foster Children's Visits to Parents in Prison

<http://www.cga.ct.gov/2002/olrdata/kid/rpt/2002-R-0184.htm>

Hard Data on Hard Times; Empirical Data On Maternal Incarceration, Foster Care and Visitation

http://www.vera.org/publication_pdf/245_461.pdf?bulletin=30&token=1643

Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Bureau of Justice Statistics special report: Incarcerated parents and their children.*

Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice

North Carolina's Child Welfare Newsletter, *Understanding Parents in Prison* http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/cspn/vol7_no1/understand_parents_prison.htm

E-bulletin of the Child Welfare league of America, *New Funding for Children of Prisoners* <http://www.cwla.org/wer4kdz/issue.asp?ISSUEID=38>

Wright, L. E. & Seymour, C. B. (2000). *Working with children and families separated by incarceration: A handbook for child welfare agencies.*

What are organizations doing to help?

Madison Urban Ministry (<http://www.emum.org>) provides [Mentoring Connections](#), for children who have an incarcerated parent in Dane County.

[St. Rose](#), in the Milwaukee area, provides family services through its Family Reunification Program: <http://www.strosecenter.org/htmdocs/programs/family.html>.