

In support of children of incarcerated parents

By Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski, Ph.D.

Children of incarcerated parents are a significant and highly vulnerable population in our nation.

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, on Dec. 31, 2018, there were an estimated 1,471,200 people in our state and federal prisons. The majority of those in jails and prisons are black and Hispanic and are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses. Library shelves are well stocked with texts that explore the many aspects of America's hyper-incarceration phenomenon; *Mass Incarceration: An Annotated Bibliography* (Dyszlewski et al., 2016) summarizes several such texts.

To what extent, if any, our country is served by the imprisonment of so many remains a topic of vigorous debate. What is uncontested is that millions of our children are suffering the consequences of their parents' incarceration. Currently, an estimated 2.7 million — or one in 28 children under the age of 18 — have a biological father or mother who is incarcerated in a local jail, state prison, or federal prison. Many more minors have a parent that has recently been released from the correctional system.

Although information about this population of children has been slow to enter the public consciousness, the state of scientific knowledge has accelerated over the past decade. Included in this recent research is a burgeoning literature examining the intergenerational consequences of parental incarceration.

Painful separation

Parental incarceration involves the removal of an adult from the child's household or daily routine. This disruption of the parent/child relationship is a painful and traumatic event that may be accompanied by other corresponding traumatic experiences such as witnessing the arrest of the parent, financial hardship, residential instability, and school disruption. Risk factors commonly originate from two sources:

1. Parental problems such as mental illness, substance use disorder, financial stress, or domestic violence that predate and may have contributed to the incarceration and

2. Problems such as stigma, shame, grief, school disruption, parental repartnering, food insecurity, homelessness, and change in financial status introduced as a result of the parental absence.

Moreover, research suggests that parental incarceration is deleterious for a child's academic outcomes, including reduced parental school involvement, lowered teacher expectations, painful stigmatization by educators and peers, and increased special education placement. Other educational consequences noted in the literature include increased school absence, low achievement scores, grade retention, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsion.

Behavioral problems such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, attention deficiency, reduced impulse control, and increased violence toward self and others are common. The experiences and well-being of children of incarcerated parents are explored in the *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents — Research, Policy and Practice* (Eddy & Poehlmann-Tyran, 2019).

The unique obstacles and needs of this population are coming more into focus. Following are some recommendations for school

personnel, child care staff, social service workers, health care professionals, or others who work with these children and adolescents.

First and foremost, a trauma-sensitive environment is a must when working with children of incarcerated parents. The concept termed trauma-informed care (TIC) is a shift in culture that has resulted in improved outcomes for many individuals who have histories of traumatic life events or toxic stress. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a program, organization or school system that is trauma-informed:

- realizes the universal impact of trauma;
- recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma;
- integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practice; and
- seeks to actively resist retraumatization.

Education and training is a key component of a TIC environment. Every individual in the setting is trained in the effects of trauma on emotion, behavior, attachment/relationships, and cognitive functioning. Trauma research provides the back story behind many behaviors that challenge our schools and child care institutions. Armed with nuanced knowledge and interpersonal skills, especially de-escalation skills, providers interacting with these children can vastly improve the experience for all involved.

Trauma-specific education

In support of trauma-specific education, those in the setting would benefit from current prevalence data as well as information on other challenges that often accompany a child who has experienced parental incarceration. Awareness is critical. Social stigmatization by authority figures as well as peers can be crippling. Once attention is drawn to the circumstances and vulnerabilities of this population, adults can factor this information into their interactions with these children and their families. An empathetic, no-fault environment is vital. In our work with these children, one often-cited misconception is that children whose parents are in prison are destined for the same outcome. There is no evidence in support of this claim.

Children of incarcerated parents may also need emotional support. Individuals who work with these families would benefit from a close collaboration with behavioral health providers who have specialized knowledge in working with this population.

School libraries and primary care offices are prime locations to foster awareness and chip away at social stigma. With basic understanding and knowledge, we can make a difference in the lives of these highly vulnerable children.

References

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