

When a Parent is Incarcerated...



Did you know that...women with young children are the fastest growing group of inmates? (Devine, 2003 and Feinman 2004).

Children whose parent is incarcerated are impacted in a number of ways:

- **Guilt** – that the incarcerated parent committed the crime to support the family. Children often blame themselves for their parent’s incarceration.
- **Shame** – Children may be embarrassed, or ashamed, or confused as they try to make sense of their parent’s incarceration.
- **Rejection** – Incarcerated parents are often angry or ashamed and don’t talk with their children. Often they don’t know what to say, so say nothing. Sometimes family members will not allow incarcerated parents to communicate with their children. Children then feel rejected, neglected, and abandoned.
- **Lack of trust** – Children of incarcerated parents experience feelings of loss, insecurity, instability, and betrayal. This impacts children’s ability to trust.

How can adults support these children?

- **Talk about feelings with children.** “You look sad, are you missing Daddy?”, or “When you get that angry at little things I wonder if you are also angry at Mommy for going away?”
- **Be as honest with children as possible.** “Mommy won’t be coming home for a very long time. It will be four more birthdays”.
- **Remember to keep your feelings separate from the child’s.** Don’t impress upon the children your feelings about the incarceration. Remember, the incarcerated parent is still important to the child and we should respect the relationship that exists between them. Refrain from disparaging remarks about the parent in the presence of the child.
- **Talk about the family’s choice to tell others or keep it a secret** from certain people. Let children know why this choice is necessary and provide opportunities to discuss it from their point of view.
- **Encourage** children to write or draw their feelings.
- **Read with your child.** Include books about children of prisoners or parents that are away for long periods of time.
- **Get support and help for children and adults involved...**through friends, clergy, or counselors.

(Adapted from Children of Prisoners website: www.childrenofhope.com)

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors in Child Care Centers