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Facts and Issues: CIPL 102

Why Maintain Relationships?

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

Is prison visiting good for the child of an incarcerated parent? Is it good for the incarcerated parent? Is it good for the family?

There is no one right answer for every situation or family. But there are many families and children that can benefit from maintaining family ties through the crises of incarceration.

Can contact with an incarcerated parent benefit children?

Each family situation is different. The potential benefit to children depends greatly on how much support they receive. There are many adults who are important in the lives of children of incarcerated parents. Children can benefit when adults help with letter writing and phone calls. They can also benefit when these adults participate in preparing for and conducting visits.

Potential Benefits to Children

- **Correcting frightening and idealized images**

What the child imagines about the incarcerated parents condition and

circumstances is likely to be much worse and more frightening than the reality. As depressing as a prison visiting room may be, it is far better than what many children imagine. Sometimes a way of coping with the parents absence is to put the parent on a pedestal, thinking they can do no wrong. That is really hard on parents who are, of course, human. Visiting the parents help children to see that parents make mistakes and are not perfect. This is a good thing for everyone.

- **Talking face to face**

Children cope best when they are told the truth about their parents incarceration. It is much easier for incarcerated parents to talk honestly with their children about their feelings of the crime and life behind bars when they are together even if they were initially told on the phone or in a letter. This can decrease the child's guilt and feelings of responsibility which research says can lessen trauma and loss symptoms.

- **Learning you are not alone**

Seeing other children and families at prison visits helps families know their situation is not unique. There are people who understand.

- **Preparing for release**

Maintaining contact through visits, phone and mail is also important to prepare the incarcerated parent to be re-united with the family upon release. Without contact, the child may experience the parent's return as an intrusion. The child may be confused when the newly released parent brings a change in parenting style and rules to an established routine in the family. This can be true whether or not the parent will live with the child.

- **Preventing termination of parental rights**

For children placed in foster care because of parental incarceration, visits are important to avoid permanent placement. These visits which are typically a part of a parents' reunification plan, also assure children that their parents have not voluntarily abandoned them to strangers. In the lives of foster children, ongoing visiting creates continuity. And, courts may be less inclined to terminate the rights of a parent who, followed their plan and even though incarcerated, worked to provide parental support.

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CIPL #102: *Why Maintain Relationships?*

- **Healing grief and loss**

The pain of separation can overwhelm children in foster care and other children of incarcerated parents. Maintaining the relationship between the child and the incarcerated parent is important to the child's adjustment and healing.

Can contact with family members behind bars benefit families?

Families can benefit from bridging the gap between jail and community. Families are complex systems. The absence of a part of the system has a powerful impact on its functioning. Family members in prison can be a vibrant part of the family if communication exists.

While prison limits the activities that a family member can perform, a prisoner can still fill an important role in family life as mother, father, spouse, partner, or sibling.

But families can only benefit from their relationship with an incarcerated member when and if they stay in communication.

Can contact with families benefit the incarcerated?

The family is probably this country's most valuable weapon in fighting crime. Prisoners who receive visitors, maintain family ties, and are released to a stable home environment are more likely to succeed in leading productive, crime-free lives.

Incarcerated persons clearly benefit from family efforts to stay in touch. Families can provide an incentive for them to grow, learn and change. Families can help those behind bars to stay in touch with what's going on in the world, easing their transition back to society. Some parole authorities

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see strong family ties as an indicator that those who are incarcerated are better prepared for release.

Many incarcerated parents can contribute positively to a child's upbringing. Prisoners who have failed as citizens can succeed as parents. Prison can be an opportunity to become a better parent—more caring, concerned and informed.

Prison may not be the best place to improve one's parenting, but it has been done. Around the country, there is growing interest in starting and expanding programs to help prisoners learn the skills of parenting. The Directory of Programs at www.nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu lists many examples.

There are several ways children can benefit from visits to their incarcerated parents.

There are many reasons for families separated by arrest and imprisonment to keep in touch. There are also many reasons that doing so is difficult.

Children of Incarcerated Parents Library pamphlets are designed to make the process a little easier. For more ideas on maintaining relationships, see CIPL pamphlets 103, 105 and 107 and 201 – 204. 

About the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL)

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated current website: nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold. Sorry, the NRCCFI is not budgeted to mail free copies. Send comments to the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library at Rutgers University Camden, 405-7 Cooper Street, Room 103, Camden, NJ 08102-1521. 856/225-2718, 856/225-6435 Fax

In Appreciation

Visiting Mom or Dad was originally published by Ann Adalist-Estrin in 1998, supported by a grant from the Junior League of Philadelphia. The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library was originally supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

Sponsoring organizations also included: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, New York for permission to revise and publish material from their original pamphlets, *How Can I Help?* For information on Osborne's 2014 *Stronger Together Handbooks*, go to www.osborneny.org.

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