



# Children of Prisoners LIBRARY

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For Health Care Providers: CPL 303



## Common Stress Points

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

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

A parent's involvement in the criminal justice system often results in a series of crises: arrest, trial, incarceration, and re-entry. Each *stress point* presents new obstacles for children and families as they experience unexpected emotions that challenge established coping strategies.

### **The Arrest: Fear, Confusion and Panic**

The trauma experienced by children who have a parent taken from them is extraordinary, perhaps more so if the child witnesses the arrest of the parent. The image of the person you love and respect being chained and dragged away is devastating. Even for children who do not witness the arrest, this image is terrifying.

Fueled by negative media images, children imagine the worst about their parent's condition. Families and children rarely have any information about the arrest, arraignment and detention process. They have no idea how,

when and if they will ever see the arrested person again.

### **Pre-trial and During Trial: Anxiety and Frustration**

The arrested parent may be detained in jail to await trial or may be released on bail. In either case, this is a period of great uncertainty. No plans can be made.

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Children whose worlds have been disrupted are often unable to get answers to their questions. They do not know what is expected of them or when the family will be torn apart by outside forces.

### **Sentencing: Hopelessness and Helplessness**

For the child or other family members, the sentence usually comes as a shock. To many outside the family, this can seem odd. But the sentence makes the fears of separation a reality for the incarcerated parent as well as the children and other family members.

No matter how hopeless a case looks, most families continue to hope for a miracle until the very last minute. The sentencing is the very last minute, the time when hope dies.

### **Initial incarceration: Abandonment, Stigma and Resentment**

For the child and other family members, the set of emotions experienced are often compared to the loss of a family member through death. This metaphor does not take into consideration how shame and humiliation about prison life affects the child along with economic or other calamities.

Children are well aware of the gravity of the situation and likely to conjure up horrible visions of what life in prison is like for their parents. Further complicating

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problems include the reluctance of many custodial parents to allow children to visit a prison.

## **Pre- and Post Release: Ambivalence**

Interestingly, the times just before and after release are often the most traumatic for children and families. Problems, which were central to a family's culture before incarceration, have rarely been handled during the prison term. Children have changed during the parent's incarceration. They are older and at different stages of development. They have different needs and expectations. Yet imprisoned parents may not have seen the growth. Released prisoners often treat their children as if they were still at the age of initial incarceration.

The custodial parent has also changed. In two-parent families, he or she has had to become both mother and father and has gained independence and competence in areas formerly ceded entirely to the incarcerated partner. There may be considerable tension about how the relationship between the parents is to go forward.

Incarceration changed the newly released parent as well. In prison, he or she suffered a loss of identity and respect and made few decisions. The environment was filled with anger and hostility, kindness was interpreted as weakness, and there was no privacy. Release to freedom carries with it the danger that needs and emotions kept in check will come boiling up or explode.

This period is also filled with expectations of a new life and mended ways. Children and adults

alike will feel an array of emotions including the ambivalence that comes with such radical changes and adjustments. Behavioral reactions will vary with each child and the environment.

The troublesome behaviors children exhibit can also be transient – appearing shortly after arrest or after the parent leaves and subsiding temporarily only to reappear at a later point. Some children react immediately to stress, challenging the adults to protect them and prove that they are competent caregivers. Other children seem to sense that the adults are vulnerable and may not be able to manage the distress. These children often act out their feelings at school or with a “protective” adult or they will hold it together until the adult seems O.K. Then, they will fall apart.

There are children who can even wait until the incarcerated parent is released to really express their rage and others who will not deal with their feelings until years after the parent's release. While there are many variations in how children and families manage each stage of involvement in the criminal justice system, the emotional impact will always cause some degree of stress and trauma.

*Health Care Providers can find more about helping children of prisoners and their families at the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL), [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). See especially the CPL 300 series, For Health Care Providers.*



## **About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)**

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The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.

