

# Homecoming: Children's Adjustment to Parent's Parole

## ▼ Ann Adalist-Estrin

What happens to children when their parent is released from jail or prison? The answers vary. It depends in part, on the quality of the attachment to that parent before and during incarceration. (Adalist-Estrin, 1993) Another factor is the extent of the trauma created by the parent's offence, arrest and imprisonment. (Johnston, 1992)

The child's adjustment to a parent's parole is also significantly related to the presence and quality of protective factors and support systems that were available during the incarceration period and upon release. (Gaynes, 1994, Johnston, 1993) Finally, we know that the most damaging aspect of incarceration is recidivism (Johnston, 1994) and the child's adjustment will be seriously compromised by the parent's return to prison. Each of these factors are independently significant and warrant discussion.

## The Parent-Child Relationship

There are often many similarities in the histories of incarcerated parents. Inmates in general, male and female, often report having grown up with inconsistent parenting and in the midst of poverty, substance abuse, addiction, physical and/or sexual abuse. (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993, Lanier, 1987, Hairston, 1989)

There are however, many variations in the relationship patterns of these inmates and their children prior to incarceration. (Bloom and Steinhart, 1993, Adalist-Estrin, 1996) Some incarcerated parents are primary caregivers before they are imprisoned. Many are caring and involved whether or not they reside with their children. Some incarcerated parents are uninvolved, disconnected and perhaps unattached. Some parents become genuinely involved while incarcerated, but have a great deal of difficulty maintaining relationships with their children on the street.

Still others may disconnect from their children during incarceration out of fear, hurt and self protection. It hurts to see children sad or angry, it's scary to feel unsure of what is happening to them out there, perhaps in the care of those who were hurtful to them in their own childhoods.

We often do not know the true depth of attachment between a parent who is going to prison and his/her child. In fact, the child's view of the parent-child relationship often differs from that of the parent — and the child's perception of attachment has historically been positively linked to resilience (Werner, 1982, Werner, 1987) self-esteem (Fraiberg, 1977) and social competence.

We know then, that maintaining, strengthening or initiating such bonds can be critical to the child's overall development as well as to their adjustment after the parent's release.

This adjustment is also directly related to the style of coping used by the family during the imprisonment period.

## The family on hold

This type of family often visits their incarcerated member, writes or telephones. They take pictures of events, people and places to keep their loved one connected to their lives. Rarely however, are feelings discussed. Anger about the crime or the incarceration, sadness, abandonment, confusion, loss, frustration and hurt are all real and ever present emotions that are left on hold to deal with upon release. There is often a focus on the positive commitment to make this period of separation “ok.”

### **The parallel family**

Families in this group keep in touch by letter or phone with occasional visits. They have a “life goes on” attitude without positive or negative emotion. “This happened and we’ll deal with it.” These family members tend to develop their own lives, meet new people, learn new skills and grow in completely separate ways from the incarcerated person.

### **The estranged family**

This family is cut off from the incarcerated member. Sometimes the family has decided not to maintain contact or foster parents cannot coordinate visitation. Often, it is the inmate who is unable to cope with the feelings that come with relationships or with frustrating correctional policies.

### **The turbulent family**

Negative feelings are expressed in out of control ways in this family. They are never able to develop effective relationship skills. Contact during incarceration can become hurtful and abusive at worst, or simmering and unpredictable at best.

And so it goes with children and their families adapting to the incarceration of a parent in a variety of ways.

### **Going Home**

When the release from prison or jail finally comes, it creates a major crisis for most families. (Fishman and Cassin, 1981) The inmate’s homecoming is likely to be shrouded by joblessness, economic hardship, or continuous poverty. In addition, role changes and restructuring of responsibilities by spouses and children can cause resentment and anger in the post parole period. A child’s adjustment to release is often related to or a continuation of their style of coping during incarceration.

- **On hold families** often feel initially relieved at their abilities to have weathered the storm. They are confident that the worst is behind them. When the intensity of family life combines with many years of unresolved anger and hurt, the outcome can be disastrous. This is especially true for children who need an opportunity to express those feelings in safety but feel that doing so may cause harm to the family.
- **The parallel family** has to reconcile their images of themselves as “the same as before incarceration” with all of the changes that have occurred. These changes often threaten the confidence of the released prisoner and pose many challenges to the relationships. Children are often faced with the dilemma of choosing to keep their “self” and risk the relationship or give up their new roles, identity OR feelings to keep the relationship.
- **The estranged family** must often cope with the released prisoner’s attempts to “surprise” them, reconcile the relationships and pick up where they left off. For children, the conflict caused by the decision to welcome parents back vs. rejecting their overtures may cause massive distress, internal conflicts, and loyalty issues with custodial caregivers.

- **The turbulent family** is likely to continue to operate in a volatile fashion. Children may also attempt to express feelings they were unable to during incarceration and if they fear the violent and unpredictable reactions of parents, this acting out may occur outside the family, in school or on the street.

In each of these families the effect of the parents' coping strategies on the child's development is significant. As shown in the table on page 5, Children in Category I are clearly at risk whereas children in Category III may show fewer signs of distress. While extremes are always clear, Categories II and III are likely to pose many challenges for children as they attempt to cope. This is often done in the context of the previously incarcerated parent's struggle to gain employment, adjust to freedom and navigate a world that is usually hostile to "ex-cons." The children's feelings, perceptions and reactions can be experienced as rejection and/or disrespect to the paroled parent as well as to other adults. The parents' reactions in turn (usually hurt or angry) can interfere with the child's ability to adjust.

Clearly, children of incarcerated parents are at risk during their parent's incarceration. (Adalist-Estrin, 1994) This period of separation is particularly damaging when it occurs in the context of enduring trauma and poverty. (Johnston, 1992)

This damage is not automatically repaired when parents are released. We know that clusters of risk factors and combinations of stressors mutually intensify negative environmental effects, before, during and after the incarceration of a parent. We also know however, that protective factors woven into the tapestry of a child's life exponentially increase the potential for resilience (Rutter, 1979, Schorr, 1988) and post parole adjustment.

### **Protective Factors**

Key members of a child's community such as clergy, relatives, foster parents, caseworkers, teachers, counselors, and child welfare personnel can be in position to play pivotal roles in supporting children in their adjustment to reunion. This is especially true when these relationships were established during incarceration and are viewed as supportive by the child. Children experience a wide variety of both positive and negative emotions as they try to understand and accept their returning parent. They need adults who will listen and help them to communicate about these feelings. Often, the adults who have been closest to the situation are unable to provide that support without help. If social service professionals, school personnel and health care providers are aware of and fully understand the needs of children of incarcerated parents, additional supports will be available to children and their families. (Gaynes, 1994) In *The Vulnerable Child*, Richard Weissbourd also suggests that policy makers need to fully understand the complexity of issues causing vulnerability in children and to identify the family, school and community circumstances that will "help children stay in one piece...when their families are torn apart." (R. Weissbourd, 1996)

Families that are nurtured by communities which are strengthened by agencies and systems that serve them will be better able to provide the protective factors necessary for the optimal adjustment of both parent and child in the post-parole period. Without these supports, the inmate parents leave prison armed with fantasies and illusions about renewed relationships. Children are often testing the limits and safety of the parent-child relationship as well as attempting to express feelings verbally or behaviorally. The families often face financial hardship and/or the threat of continued substance abuse. When these forces combine, paroled parents are faced with an overwhelming sense of failure. They often resort to coping strategies that are illegal, abusive or self destructive, resulting in parole violations or new offenses.

We know that parental recidivism creates loss and a sense of hopelessness in children that increases or perpetuates trauma and decreases children's coping skills.

It is therefore critical for those who work with the children of prisoners and ex-prisoners to:

- a) fully understand the feelings children typically struggle with during their reunion;
- b) look at the cycles of coping in families and

c) develop strategies for providing information, support and counseling opportunities to children and their parents.

## **Stages of Children's Adjustment to Parents' Parole**

### **Stage I – Honeymoon**

Everyone's at their best and trying to please but often there is anxiety under the surface.

*Danella's dad was incarcerated for 3 years. She had visited often and the entire family welcomed Dad home with open arms. For several weeks, things went smoothly. Danella (age 7) wanted to make her father happy. She was cooperative and helpful.*

*She also woke up every night and insisted on being allowed into her parents' bed.*

*She wasn't prepared for the resentment she felt toward her Dad now that she and her Mom were no longer "a team." This created tension and disagreements between Mom and Dad. Dad also wanted to discipline Danella.*

*Mom resented Dad's interference with the child rearing tasks that had been her responsibility for 3 years. The pediatrician was consulted about the sleep disruption and referred them for counseling.*

### **Stage II – Suspicion**

Once children are comfortable letting some of the negative feelings emerge, they often question their previously incarcerated parent's roles, motives and most of all the permanence of their presence.

*Bo aged 3 ½ was unable to tolerate being separated from his Mom once she arrived home from prison. Every time Mom went near the door, Bo would cry. For the 18 months of her incarceration, he had heard his grandmother discuss his mother's drug addiction with neighbors and friends so he would often ask her if she was going to get drugs.*

*The child welfare worker helped Terri, Bo's mom, to be predictable and consistent with Bo, but also to leave him for short periods with trusted adults so he learned to anticipate her consistent returns.*

### **Stage III – Resistance**

During this stage, children test the limits of the rules and with their actions ask the question "how bad can I be and will you still love me?"

*Liza had been incarcerated twice. Each time she returned, her children Tony 6 and Nathaniel 9, would go through periods of defiance with oppositional reactions. They needed to see if she was able to be the authority figure that they needed to feel safe. They questioned her ability to do that when she herself was unable to respect the law. Their question, of course, came in the form of behavior (stealing money from their Mom's wallet and fighting at school.) The school counselor had not been aware of the family's circumstances. Once told, she gave Liza materials to read, offered peer support counseling for each of the boys and gave Liza a sense of hope that she and her children were regarded with respect for their needs rather than with prejudice and rejection.*

### **Stage IV – Expression Or Withholding**

Can I show my feelings and ask my questions or should I "stuff" them?

*Kenya and Kyle were both incarcerated for 2 years. Their children, Tania 9, Keisha 6 and Bud 2 were in foster care. During the reunification visits, each child was quiet, obedient and polite. They were unable to express their feelings verbally or behaviorally. The acute sense of loss experienced by these children from the loss of both parents prohibited these young children from communicating their feelings effectively. On the surface, these children seemed to be adjusting well. They were however, internalizing all of their feelings and responses.*

It is dangerous to assume that children who are not emotive are OK. Lack of affective expression can be as serious as acting out and aggression. Professional and family members who are in close proximity to children of incarcerated parents, will be most helpful when they can acknowledge the typical feelings experienced by most children in this situation thus gently encouraging them to express themselves.

## **Feelings of Children Related to Parental Incarceration**

### ***Guilt/Worry – The universal residue of caring.***

When you love someone, you worry about them even if they make mistakes or commit a crime. Children, (especially young ones) will worry about their parents and look for cues as to how the parent is adjusting. These feelings may be intensified by exposure to TV shows about prisons. Children will also feel guilt and sometimes responsibility for the parents' crime. They wonder if Mom or Dad broke the law because the child was "bad" (illogical but common thinking for young children.) Then, if they misbehave and upset the parent will Mom or Dad go back to jail? Sometimes these feelings are obvious. Most times they are subconscious and show up looking like fear or anger.

### ***Fear – Real or Symbolic***

Children often express fear when they cannot effectively express other emotions. Parents and caregivers tend to accept fear more readily than anger or sadness. Children may really fear a repeated loss or violent parental outbursts, but they may speak of fear of the dark or of dogs. These are often symbolic fears – bodies given to the ghosts of feelings that children are afraid to speak of.

### ***Confusion – The True Effect of Truth***

Many children of incarcerated parents were not told the truth about their parents crime and/or absence. Parents often fear that the truth will be too painful or difficult for children. Often this is the case. In fact, the known is usually easier to cope with than the unknown. Children who are lied to often feel suspicious during incarceration and then when parents are home and it's less risky to challenge them, the questions and confrontations occur.

### ***Anger – A Secondary Emotion***

Anger is a feeling that follows a different emotion. Angry feelings occur for all children. For those with incarcerated parents, the anger often comes from feelings of confusion, fear, worry or from frustration, disappointment and resentment. Adults often react only to the anger and do not address the primary feeling. They may try to explain the anger away, by telling children the reasons things happened and insuring them that they have nothing to be angry about.

Or, they may return the anger especially if they experience the child's feelings as disrespectful or inappropriate. This usually increases the child's sense of mistrust and frustration and likewise increases the angry secondary reaction. Even when limits need to be set on the way the child shows the anger, the feelings of anger must be acknowledged.

## Conclusion

Children, their families and their communities, differ greatly as do the crimes committed by their parents and the circumstances surrounding their reunion. There are two primary concerns for all children who are adjusting to the release of a parent from jail or prison. First, their parents must receive adequate support, information and counseling in the post parole period. All too often, “staying straight” is viewed as simply a matter of applying oneself. This perspective ignores the overwhelming obstacles that face released offenders. Assisting parents with their own feelings of adjustment as well as helping them to understand their children’s feelings can potentially prevent the hopelessness that leads to recidivism.

Secondly, professionals who work with children/teachers, caregivers, child welfare workers, doctors, nurses and counselors must be given tools and information that lead to an understanding of the precarious nature of the post release period and that provide children with a forum for expressing their feelings as their parents struggle to renew their lives. In addition, parents and children alike may need respite time away from the intensity of this process.

When a child’s parent goes to prison with rare exception, the child mourns. They may mourn the loss of the parent, the games they played with them, the meals they ate together or the stories that were read. Or, they may mourn the loss of the hope of the fantasy of what their parent might have been, in time.

Either way, children spend the period of incarceration hoping and waiting...for the return of their primary nurturer or for the arrival of a newly formed parent figure larger than life and better than ever. The post release period will be filled with readjustments of those images. They need adults who will listen to them and who will truly understand the power of their feelings and who will honor the overall significance of the parent-child relationship in spite of the parents’ crime.

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**Author's Note:** Recently, a mother told me that the post release period was harder than the 4 years of her husband's incarceration but that the "Stages of Adjustment" in this article had helped her tremendously. A grandmother caregiver of the children of her incarcerated daughter said that she cried more tears when her daughter came home and everyone was adjusting, acting out and adjusting again, than she cried in the 12 years of her daughter's time and that the support she did get during the incarceration, disappeared when Mom returned and everyone thought all would be fine now.

An inmate father reported that after reading this article he changed the "Estranged Family" coping pattern and that he and his child's mother were in hopes of better reunification preparation.

This article was originally written for and presented at the Child Welfare League of America Annual Conference – 1996. The stories above from 2002 reminded me that very little needed to be changed to bring this article current. Release preparation needs to begin the moment a parent goes to prison or jail. The incarcerated parent and the caregiver need support from their respective communities to be ready and able to meet the demands of release and homecoming.

New resources by this author: *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide* (with Jim Mustin) available for purchase from FCN, February 2003 and *The Children of Incarcerated Parents Library* available free on-line at [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org), spring 2003.