Numbers Talk

In 2007, 1.7 million minor children had a parent in prison, an 82% increase since 1991.

One in 43 American children has a parent in prison.

One in 15 black children and 1 in 42 Latino children has a parent in prison, compared to 1 in 111 white children.

*The Sentencing Project 2009*

Concerned Responses

After many years of advocacy, it is finally registering to the American public that having a parent go to jail or prison effects a lot of children:

- Washington Briefings
- CNN.com
- Airline magazine articles
- 9 Book chapters/article requests
- 7 Documentaries / TV stories

The Buzz Words

- 70% more likely
- Breaking the chain
- The intergenerational cycle

“…break the intergenerational cycle of crime and incarceration and give a forgotten (invisible) group of children the chance to reach their highest potential.”

*MCP program brochure 2009*

Images That Hurt

- “Kids of Cons”
- “Their parents are prostitutes and drug addicts but they want to do better.”
- “These children have no one to give them affection or guidance.”
- “Would you want your child to be parented by a thug?”

Implied Causal Patterns

Ann Adalist-Estrin, Author. Do not use or reproduce without permission.
Implied Causal Patterns

Dangerous Assumptions

“If we are at risk for following in our parents footsteps, perhaps it is because you say we are.”

Sylvester 16 year old son of an incarcerated father in Connecticut

Examining the Cycle

Government Separation of Children and Parents: Attending to Attachment

Child Abuse and Neglect: Child Welfare Supports

Military Deployment: DOD Supports

Incarceration: No Supports

Needing a New Frame

➢ Attachment Theory
➢ Brain Development Research
➢ Trauma Research

The importance of attachment

“If you want to know the end, look at the beginning.”  African Proverb
Developmental Tasks
For Children and Youth

Infancy through Adolescence

- Forming identity
- Taking risks
- Knowing self
- Reading others
- Differentiation/Affiliation
- Attachment/Separation

Developmental Tasks
For Children and Youth

- Infancy: Wooing Other Back
  Trust in Other → Attachment

- Toddlerhood: Testing the Strength of the Attachment
  Trust in Self → Autonomy

- Pre-School: Testing the Boundaries of the Attachment
  Differentiation

- School Age: Practicing the Attachment with Others
  Affiliation → Confidence

- Pre-Adolescence: Examining Attachments
  Meaning/Morality

- Adolescence: Challenging the Attachments with Risk Taking and Identity Formation
  Self Awareness and Competence

Attachment-Historical Perspective

John Bowlby, 1969 - Attachment patterns
Mary Ainsworth, 1973 - Attachment types
Charles Zeanah, 1999 - Attachment disorders
Michael Rutter, 2004 - Romanian Orphans
Phillip J. Flores, 2004 - Addiction as an Attachment Disorder

The Attachment Literature

- **Attachment** is an enduring emotional bond characterized by a tendency to seek and maintain closeness to a specific figure, particularly during stressful situations
- Closeness to the attachment figure provides protection and a psychological sense of security
- Parents are usually a child’s primary attachment figures and development is deeply affected by the behavior of parents even when children spend most of their time in the care of others.
The Attachment Literature

Within the context of early parent-child interactions and relationships, young children develop emotion regulation, becoming behaviorally and physiologically organized.

The Attachment Literature

Children with secure early attachments are more likely in later years to:

- form friendships and be leaders with peers
- be better problem-solvers
- be more empathetic and less aggressive
- engage their world with confidence
- have higher self-esteem
- be better at resolving conflict
- be more self-reliant and adaptable
- have better school readiness skills

Attachment Disruptions

Children and adults can present on a continuum of attachment disruption but typically fall in one of two categories of relationship behaviors from

- Any Warm Body Will Do to
- Letting No One In

Trauma in Children: Key Points

- An incident is traumatic if it carries a threat against life, physical well being or personal security
- Children always experience the loss of a parent as traumatic
- Trauma changes brain architecture
- Children can be re traumatized by situations characterized by additional threats or simple uncertainty

(Perry 2004)

The Impact of Trauma

Trauma or perceived danger causes the excretion of adrenalin and cortisol in amounts that cause brain damage and death in laboratory animals.

(Perry 2004)

The Impact of Trauma

The presence of parents or other adult attachment figures lowers the dangerous levels of cortisol.

(Duster, 2005)
The Positive Cycle

Resilience ➔ Trauma

Reinforcement ➔ Cortisol

Recovery ➔ Attachment

Attachment & Trauma

Important Connections
- Primary attachment figures provide a buffer from the most damaging effects of trauma
- Separation from the primary attachment figures causes trauma

Attachment-Contemporary Perspective

Scientists now know that chronic, unrelenting stress in early childhood, caused by abrupt separation from caregivers, extreme poverty, or parental depression, for example, can be toxic to the developing brain in the same way as repeated abuse and witnessing violence changes brain architecture.

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University,


Attachment-Contemporary Perspective

Any loss can retraumatize a child or adult as can situations characterized by additional threats or simple uncertainty

Positive Stress

Moderate, short-lived physiological response:
- Increased heart rate
- Higher blood pressure
- Mild elevation of cortisol levels

Positive Stress

Activated by:
- Dealing with perceived moderate danger, frightening or frustrating situations

Relieved by:
- Disappearance of threat or reframed perception
Tolerable Stress

Physiological responses large enough to disrupt brain architecture

Activated by:
- Threats or dangers with longer duration and/or lack of power to make changes that will diminish the threat
- Such as the death of a loved one, natural disasters, parental abandonment or perceived abandonment

Tolerable Stress

It is tolerable only when it is relieved by supportive relationships:
- that facilitate coping,
- restore heart rate and lower cortisol levels
- reduce child’s sense of being overwhelmed

National Scientific Council on the Developing Brain, Harvard University 2006

Toxic Stress

Strong & prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of buffering protection of adult support

Activated by:
- Recurrent abuse, neglect, care-giver depression, substance abuse, family violence or triggers for tolerable stress that are prolonged and without supports
- Increased susceptibility to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, obesity, diabetes and mental health problems

Impact on Brain Development

- Impulse Control
- Cause and Effect
- Predictability
- Emotional Regulation
- Reciprocal Engagement

Long Term Reactions

All loss raises old loss - all trauma raises old trauma

The Negative Cycle
Long Term Reactions

ACE Study: Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

The ACE Study is an ongoing collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente. Led by Co-principal Investigators Robert F. Anda, MD, and Vincent J. Felitti, MD. The ACE Study is perhaps the largest scientific research study of its kind, analyzing the relationship between multiple categories of childhood trauma (ACEs), and health and behavioral outcomes later in life.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Growing up experiencing any of the following conditions in the household prior to age 18:

- Recurrent physical or emotional abuse or neglect
- Sexual abuse
- An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
- An incarcerated household member
- Someone who is chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
- Mother is treated violently
- One or no parents

Adverse Childhood Experiences

“In our detailed study of over 17,000 American adults of diverse ethnicity, we found that the compulsive use of nicotine, alcohol, and injected street drugs increases proportionally in a strong, graded, dose-response manner that closely parallels the intensity of adverse life experiences during childhood.”

The Origins of Addiction: Evidence from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

Vincent J. Felitti 2003

Reframing the Cycle

Most addictions begin with an attempt to self-medicate/create dopamine in the aftermath of trauma

There is significant trauma in the backgrounds of incarcerated parents

There is significant addiction in the population of parents who are or were incarcerated

Addiction interferes with attachment

Attachment disruption causes trauma

Children of Incarcerated Parents:

Children of incarcerated parents mourn the loss of that incarcerated parent. The one that cared for them or the one that could have.
Children of Incarcerated Parents:

The extended absence/loss of a parent to incarceration is usually exacerbated by poverty, poor early care/educational environments, violent neighborhoods and racism.

UNIQUE STRESS of PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Common Stress Points for Families
- Arrest: Fear, Confusion, Panic
- Pre trial/ Trial: Anxiety, Frustration
- Sentencing: Hopelessness, Helplessness
- Initial Incarceration: Abandonment, Stigma, Loyalty
- Incarceration Stage 2: Resentment, Balance
- Pre-release: Fear, Anxiety, Anticipation
- Post-Release: Ambivalence, Chaos

UNIQUE STRESS of PARENTAL INCARCERATION

“Distorted in the telling & buried in the untelling”
Randall Robinson

UNIQUE STRESS of PARENTAL INCARCERATION

• Stigma and Shame
• Conspiracy of Silence
• Loyalty Conflicts
• Trauma of Separation without support

Stigma and Shame

“Those who say that the families of the incarcerated suffer no shame or stigma because they are used to it, have spent no time in the community with these families.”

“Doing Time On The Outside” Donald Bramen 2007

Conspiracy of Silence

• Children are not told the truth about their parent’s whereabouts
• Children are told the truth but told not to tell
• Children are told the truth, allowed to tell but discouraged from speaking their feelings
Loyalty Conflicts

Children of Incarcerated Parents: The Effects

Mental Health
- Separation and attachment disorders
- Depression
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Anxiety and hyper arousal, attention disorders, and developmental regression
- Trauma (post-traumatic stress responses)
These issues often go undiagnosed, misdiagnosed or poorly treated

Children of Incarcerated Parents: The Effects

Behavioral
- Physical aggression
- Acting out inappropriately/Disruptive behavior
- Anti-social behavior (conduct disorder)
- Violent or serious delinquent behavior

These behaviors are often expressions of feelings and/or symptoms of distress

Children of Incarcerated Parents: The Effects

Educational
- Attentional Difficulties
- Learning Disabilities
- Diminished academic performance
- Behavior Problems
- Truancy
These behaviors are often emotional and behavioral influences on the learning process

Honoring Attachments for Children and their Incarcerated Parents

Why is this in question?

IMPLICATIONS for PROGRAMS

Eighty-six percent of minor children of the incarcerated were under 10 years of age
22 percent were under five
Hairston (2008)
Quick Check: Assumptions Beliefs and Attitudes

1. Children of incarcerated parents need ________________________________
2. Incarcerated parents need ________________________________
3. Incarcerated parents should ________________________________
4. The best thing that could happen to the children of incarcerated parents is ________________________________
5. The worst thing that could happen to children of incarcerated parents is ________________________________

Examining the Cycle

There is evidence to suggest that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to live in poverty and experience household instability, exposure to parental mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction and domestic violence than other children.*


* Study of children in the Child Welfare System

Examining the Cycle

Many responses and interventions are designed from an “alternative role model” or “better off without their parents” interpretation of the data.

We have a choice

Embedded Issue

Two-thirds of the incarcerated parent population is non-white.

Think About It

“Think of these children as you would your own, but never forget that they’re not...if they were yours, you would not...focus on the floor of crimelessness...as if it were the ceiling.”

Vince Schindli, DCDJJ

“Since they are not, we need to be ever mindful that they have parents (in and out of jail) that they love and are loved by.”

Ed, Maryland mentor
ADVOCACY THAT HARMs

“The Big Bad Wolf needed a mentor…”

design by graphics student volunteer

Advocacy that Heals

- Recognize that incarceration causes trauma and/or re-traumatizes those who have experienced trauma
- Adapting to trauma causes behaviors such as (disconnecting from family) that are misinterpreted

See Freeing Tammy by Jody Raphael 2007

Supporting Parent-Child Relationships for Children & Parents

- Minimizing or repairing attachment disruptions
- Talking face to face
- Correcting frightening images
- Correcting idealized images
- Learning you are not alone

Supporting Parent-Child Relationships for Children & Parents

- Preventing termination of parental rights
- Providing buffers
- Healing grief and loss
- Preparing for release

OPPORTUNITIES

- Making: Parent-Child Relationships that begin during incarceration
- Mending: Parent-Child Relationships that need to heal during incarceration
- Maintaining: Parent-Child Relationships that need support to keep the connection and only sometimes
- Managing in the Absence: Parent-Child relationships that cannot be

NRCCFI at FCN

- Disseminating accurate data
- Training, inspiring, preparing and connecting those working in and around the field
- Guiding family strengthening policy and practice
- Including the families in defining the problem and designing solutions
Presenter Contact Information

To get a copy of this presentation-
E-mail me
Adalist@fcnetwork.org