

## Attachment, Trauma, Addictions and Cycles: A New Frame for Viewing Children and Families of the Incarcerated



Practical Strategies for Addressing Trauma, Addiction, Mental Health, and Corrections  
Centerforce Summit 2009

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on Children and Families of the Incarcerated  
at FCN

## 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

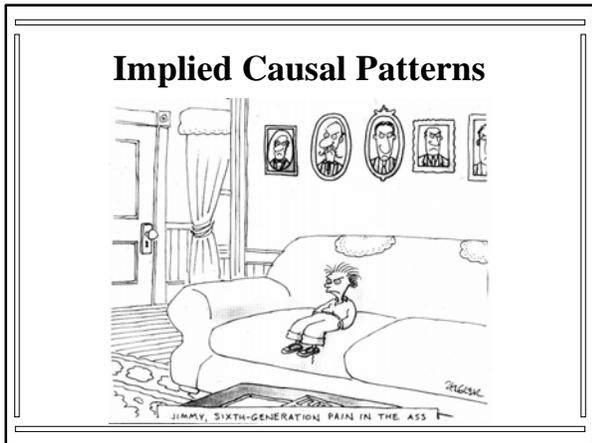
## IMAGES THAT HURT



- “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





### BREAK THE CHAIN



Joe R. 58



Joe R. Jr. 36



Jimmy R. 16

Adapted from Mentoring program website-2009

### Dangerous Assumptions

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

*Sylvester 16 year ole 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

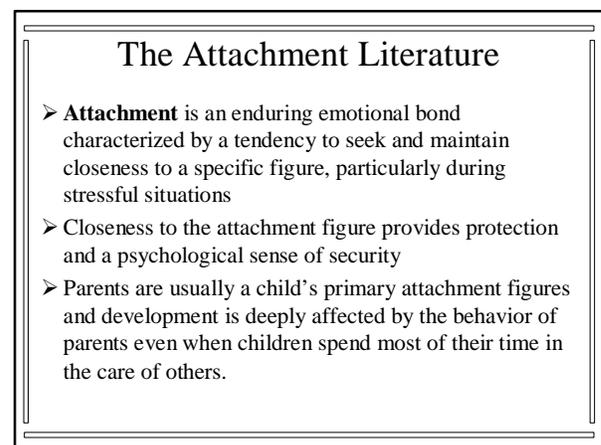
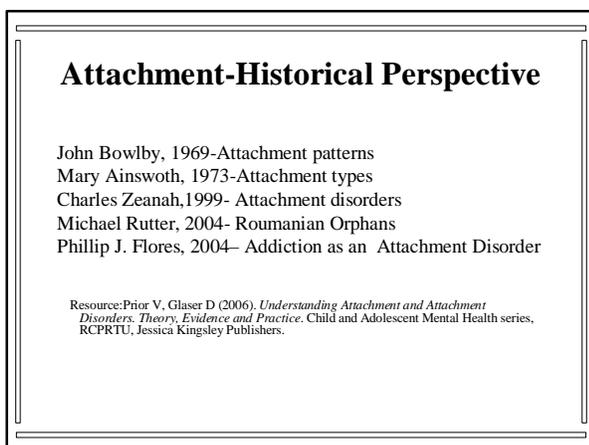
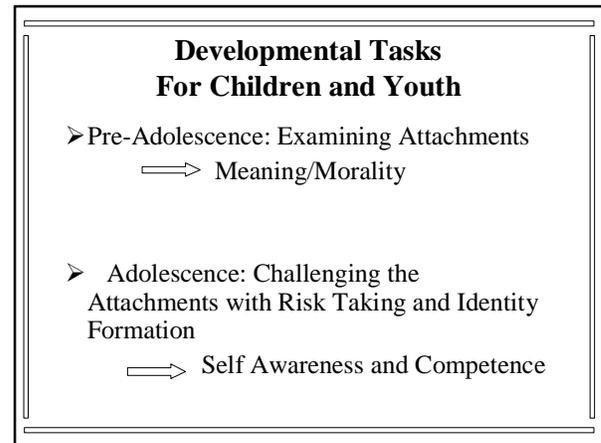
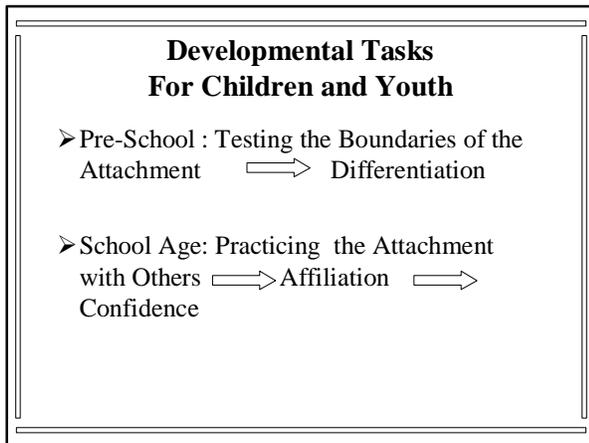
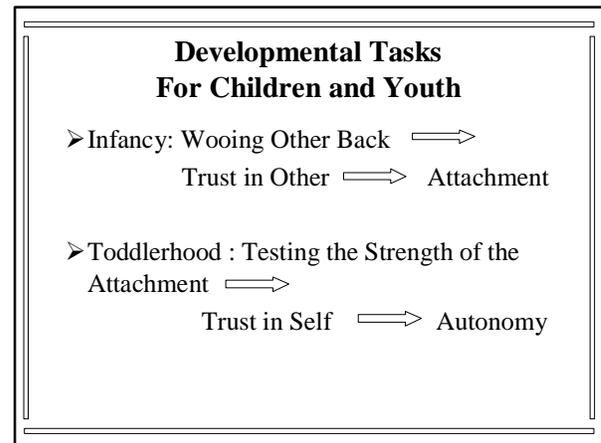
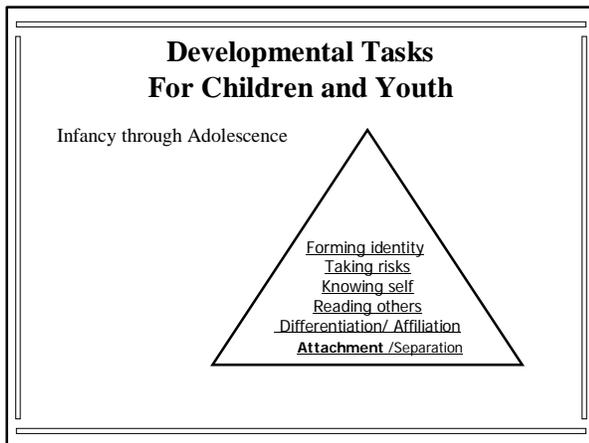
- Attachment Theory
- Brain Development Research
- Trauma Research



### The importance of attachment

“If you want to know the end, look at the beginning.” African Proverb





## 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**

(Mc Allister-Groves, Child Witness to Violence Project 2002)

## 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)

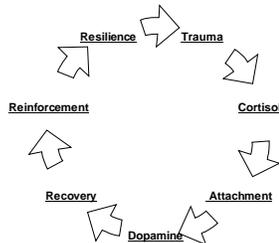
## The Impact of Trauma



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

(Dozier, 2005)

## The Positive Cycle



## 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,  
*In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. NGA  
 Center for Best Practices, National Conference of State  
 Legislatures, and Center on the Developing Child, Harvard  
 University, 2008, [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu).

## Attachment-Contemporary Perspective

Any loss can re-traumatize 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

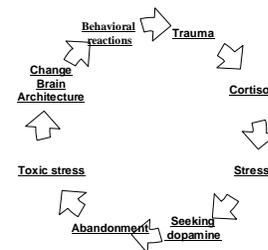
- Impulse Control
- Cause and Effect
- Predictability
- Emotional Regulation
- Reciprocal Engagement

## 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

*PET Scan studies reveal that men in the prison population who meet criteria for anti-social personality disorder have smaller right hemispheres than the control group. The right hemisphere is the part of the brain that is responsible for the regulation of affect and it is the hemisphere that develops most rapidly during attachment in the in the first 18 months of life.*

*Schore, Allan N., Affect Regulation and the Origin of Self, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1994.*

## 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

**There 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.\**

Phillips, S. D., Erkanli, A., Keeler, G. P., Costello, E. J., & Angold, A. (2006).  
Disentangling the risks: Parent criminal justice involvement and children's exposure to family risks. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 5(4), 677-702.  
\* 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.

*The Sentencing Project 2009*



## 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 Schiraldi, 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**

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