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Facts and Issues: CIPL 104



Risk and Protection

Adapted from Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003, used with permission.

Children and families of the incarcerated often share common characteristics and life circumstances. Most are poor. Some live in suburban and rural communities, but most live in inner-city neighborhoods. Many are likely to experience addictions and domestic or community violence. Within that profile, however, there are many variations and a continuum of risk.

At one end of the continuum, there are families in grave danger. On the other are those with adequate support systems that are coping fairly well. In between are large numbers of children and families that are barely managing and are under great pressures.

Assessing Risk Factors for Children and Families of the Incarcerated

Research has helped us to understand the continuum of risk and has identified behaviors and characteristics that put children and families at risk. The incarceration of a family member is considered an "Adverse Childhood Experience" or ACE. ACEs are

traumatic experiences in childhood that cause changes in the architecture of the developing brain resulting in lasting effects on a person's emotional and physical health. Growing up experiencing any of the following conditions in the household prior to age 18 means that one has experienced ACEs:

- 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 (or other family member) is treated violently
- One or no parents

These ACEs first appeared as a part of a study by researchers Dr. Vincent Felitti and Dr. Robert Anda in 1998. The study links 4 or more of these ACEs to a variety of poor health outcomes in adulthood. These traumatic experiences cause what is now called toxic stress and it is this toxic stress which is believed to change the structure of the developing brain and create behavioral and emotional reactions

that unrecognized and unattended to, can result in a host of problems including school failure, addiction and delinquency.

Adverse childhood experiences are common, but they are typically concealed, unrecognized or responded to inappropriately. And, researchers continue to look at other potential ACE indicators such as poverty, foster care placement and homelessness.

Many members of the families of the incarcerated experience multiple ACEs as have the incarcerated parents, themselves. Children and families of the incarcerated also endure poverty, violent neighborhoods, substandard educational environments and various forms of institutional and interpersonal racism.

Children of the incarcerated express feelings of hopelessness, loss and defeat and/or rage and resentment. They may be more vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse as they seek connections and test boundaries. The pursuit of numbness (via drugs and alcohol) that follows in the wake of toxic stress and trauma can lead to the criminal behaviors that chemical dependence requires and unresolved rage breeds.

Some families find protection from the most damaging aspects of risk.

Qv gtu'f q'pqv0Cu'eqo o wplkgu'y qtni' vq'r tqxkf g protection and to meet the needs of these families, individual strengths and varying realities must be respected.

Some incarcerated parents were caring and involved prior to imprisonment. Some were uninvolved and disconnected before and continue that pattern inside. Some begin to build a relationship with their children only when they are locked up. Others appear involved while incarcerated, but have great difficulty maintaining their relationships on the street. Some men and women may distance themselves from their families when they go to jail. They often do so as a protective coping strategy, not from a lack of interest or caring.

Each incarcerated parent, parolee, child and family member will cope with incarceration in their own way. The incarcerated and their families remind us that each family is unique and that many factors influence a family's ability to cope with the incarceration and release of a family member.

Factors Affecting Family Coping

- Community support vs. isolation: urban, suburban or rural.
- Economic stability.
- Health and emotional capacity of caregivers.
- Quality of the child's school.
- Job satisfaction (teen's and adult's).
- Community resources.
- Child and family spirituality.
- Racial and ethnic prejudices.

What Puts Families At Additional Risk?

The following risk factors, when added to parental incarceration, increase levels of toxic stress and negative impact for children of the incarcerated.

- Abuse: physical, sexual, emotional.
- Poverty and/or parental unemployment or under-employment.
- Racism.
- Substandard schooling/education for parent and/or child.
- Alcoholism (child's or parent's).
- Drug abuse/addiction (child's or parent's).
- Deteriorating or uninhabitable housing.
- Gang involvement.
- Crime-victimization.
- Criminal activity (child's or parent's).
- Incarceration of parent or caregiver.
- Trauma...violence, abuse, terrorism or other life threatening circumstances.
- Parental neglect.
- Parental harshness.
- Low birth weight.
- Poor nutrition.
- Inferior medical care.
- Mental illness of child or parent.
- Physically or emotionally unavailable parents.
- Marital distress (parents).
- Family divorce.
- Single parenthood (parent's or teen's).
- Lack of social support (kid's or parent's)
- Lack of role models (kid's or parent's).
- Deprivation of social relationships and/or activities.
- Profound or repeated loss.
- Powerlessness-personal, family and community.

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What Protects Children and Families

Protective factors are people and things that buffer children and families from risk. They increase the capacity for survival and can foster healthy development in spite of the risks. Research on resiliency tells us that for children exposed to multiple risks, three factors stand out in those who develop successfully:

- Predictable and attached relationships with parent(s).
- Relationships with other caring adults.
- Skills and activities that build competence and confidence.
- Social connectedness of parents and families.
- Belief in a higher power, spirituality and/or affiliation with a community of faith.


People and programs can make a difference in the lives of children and families of the incarcerated. They can function as protective factors. Resilient people are resourceful in the face of difficulty, able to emotionally recover from setbacks and see themselves as capable of making a difference in others' lives. Relationships with incarcerated parents, caregiver parents or relatives and other caring adults contribute to that resilience in children of the incarcerated.

Programs that help are relevant to the needs and lives of the families they serve, partner with family members to find solutions to problems and support children and families without judging or criticizing the family members, even those who are incarcerated.

For more information on the Adverse Childhood Experience Study see <http://acestudy.org/>.

For more information on toxic stress and the developing brain see http://developingchild.harvard.edu/key_concepts/toxic_stress_response/.

For more information on protective factors see <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/the-basics/protective-factors>.

For more about how communities can help, see *Responding to Children and Families of Prisoners: A Community Guide* by Ann Adalist-Estrin and Jim Mustin, Family and Corrections Network, publisher. 

About the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL)

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