



# Children of Prisoners LIBRARY

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For Health Care Providers: CPL 304

## **Different Children/Behaviors**

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Health care providers need to know that several factors can influence the intensity of a child's reaction to parental incarceration. These factors include:

- Development
- Temperament
- Family Dynamics and Capacity
- Trauma
- Details of the Crime and Incarceration
- Available Supports

### **Development Requires That Adults:**

- Continuously use new skills and try various strategies as they respond to the child's ever-changing physical and emotional needs.
- Modulate the child's exposure to the world and keep them safe
- Interpret social expectations to guide learning and growth

Each stage of a child's development (see pyramid on page 2) includes a primary developmental task for the child and a corresponding parenting response. The incarceration of a parent poses different challenges at each stage.

### **Infancy-Attachment / Predictability Age: Birth - 1 1/2**

In the attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent even if that parent was inconsistently available to the child. If a primary caregiver parent "disappears" to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust.

Trust can develop between infants and multiple caregivers but the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placements and disruptions in the relationships with primary caregivers. Infants may also develop anxious attachments or regulation difficulties in response to stress in the family, which also interferes with attachment, trust and the ability to predict the reactions of others.

### **Toddlers-Autonomy / Emotional Safety**

**Age: 1 1/2 - 3**

In the separation or autonomy stage of development, toddlers seek to test the quality of their attachments in the face of new motor and verbal skills. The tug between the desire for independence and autonomy and the need to be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

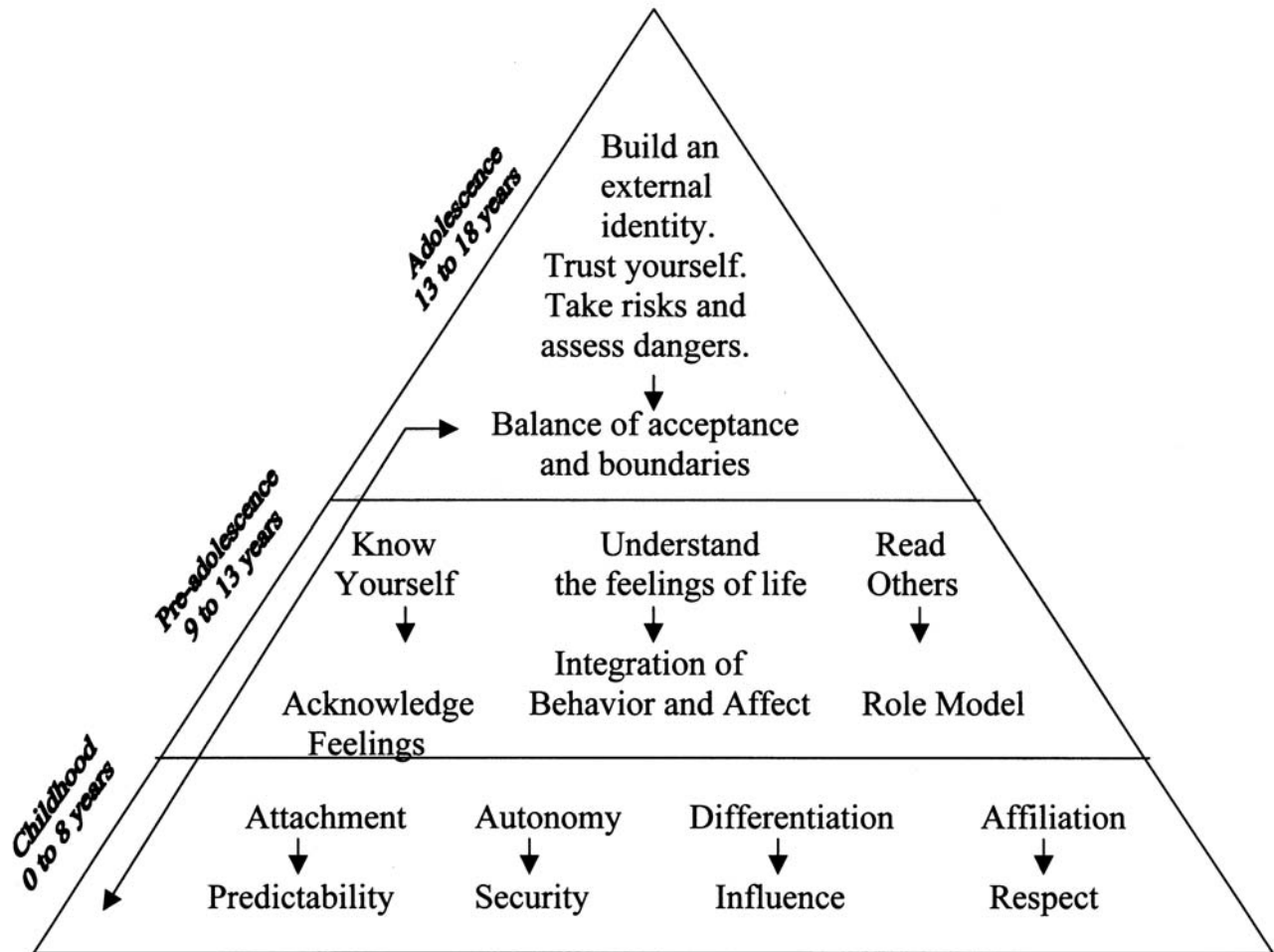
The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge caregivers as they pour emotional and physical resources into managing life in the criminal justice system.

Caregivers may react in angry or unpredictable ways. The base of security and emotional safety that toddlers need may seem unavailable. This can increase toddlers' anxiety and resulting negative behaviors.

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## An Adult's Role In Developmental Mastery



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## **Pre-Schoolers- Differentiation/ Power and Influence**

### **Age: 3-5**

In the differentiation stage children seek to establish emotional or psychological separateness from their primary attachment figures. They strive to prove their uniqueness particularly from the same gendered parent. The other parent serves often as a refuge from what can be an intense struggle. This is also the age of power and control battles and magical thinking.

“If I cooperate with you, I become you and since I am me, not you, I will not cooperate and if you make me I will hate you and wish you away.” This is not a conscious thought, but rather an unconscious motivator of behavior.

The new demands made by the adult world for self-control may also lead children of this age to apply magical thinking and fantasy to the circumstances of their parents incarceration. They believe that they are responsible in ways that are both illogical and unreasonable. They also use “transductive reasoning”...if two things happen at the same time, they are related. This further connects the child’s behaviors with the adult’s distress and circumstances.

Children, who have a parent leave for prison, (particularly a same gendered parent) may truly believe that they wished them away when they were in the midst of the struggle for power and hating them for the

powerlessness. When a child’s opposite gendered parent is incarcerated it eliminates the opportunity to use that parent as a refuge from the struggle. In both cases, pre-school children may exhibit symptoms of distress.

They may regress in behavior, experiencing bed-wetting, sleeplessness, and eating disruptions. They will also develop fears, nightmares and a return to the aggressive tantrums of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know that they have some influence on adults to get their needs met. Maintaining a connection to the incarcerated parent may be most critical at this stage of development to avoid feelings of loss of control, powerlessness and loyalty conflicts that could have lasting consequences.

## **Early School Age/ Affiliation and Choice**

### **Age: 5-8**

The grade school child is beginning to replace parents as the center of their universe. They will experience sadness at the separation but have moved out into the world. They are learning new skills and focusing on the peer group. This age child is also beginning to understand that there are problems and solutions but they have not developed a mature ability to reason from one to the other. At this stage of development, children do understand the concept of “crime and punishment.” As one first grader put it, “My Mommy is doing a really long time out.” However, as they begin to focus on affiliating with other children,

they become aware of the stigma of parental incarceration.

Early school age children need to be successful and to develop a sense of competence with adults, but more so with peers. This makes them vulnerable to taunts from schoolmates about parent’s arrest or incarceration yet unable to articulate the story or the feelings well enough to satisfy peers and to avoid upsetting or embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation and family loyalty can manifest itself in somatizations, school avoidance or phobia, selective mutism and poor school performance

## **Pre-Adolescence/ Knowing Self and Reading Others**

### **Age: 9-12**

This is the stage of social emotions. Children struggle to understand codes of ethics that vary from family to family. They are striving to learn about their own emotional reactions to peers and family members and to read the cues of others. Adults need to provide labels for children’s feelings without judging them. They also serve as role models and teach children communication skills by saying what they mean and listening with compassion.

Pre-Adolescents are also making more choices on their own, about homework, activities and friends and need to be respected for their opinions and tastes. They may choose to distance themselves from the relationship with an incarcerated parent, in part to

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exercise the choice and also to avoid the embarrassment.

Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Acting scared or angry but saying “I am fine” seriously confuses the developmental process of this age and may cause acting out behavior in an effort to get at what is really going on.

All of this is tremendously difficult for families that are fragile or overwhelmed by managing without the incarcerated parent. Family members will give children many mixed messages and many of the children’s feelings will be unacceptable to the family.

Older school aged children will need help with evolving social values in the wake of parental incarceration and the family reaction to it. They are at risk for a host of behavioral problems as they “express” the feelings that are not allowed by the family through oppositional and defiant or even delinquent behaviors. They will also need resources for resolving the emotional conflicts that are raging within themselves and in relationships.

## **Adolescence Identity /Risk Protection**

**Age: 13+**

Teens are out in the world, forming a cohesive identity and attempting to assess the dangers involved in the risk taking impulses that come with this age.

Most adolescents with incarcerated parents have

typically experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent. They have lived through previous parental imprisonments and often a lifestyle that included addictions, the chaos of financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools and communities lacking in resources. They are often expected to assume adult roles, are left for long periods without supervision and suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent.

All at once, teens can fear they will turn out like their incarcerated parent; attempt to emulate them; and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Typical patterns of behavior in response to these crises are: rejecting adult limits and authority, aggression, helplessness, hopelessness and depression, drug and alcohol use, abuse and addictions and sexual risk taking.

A version of this developmental outline is available for caregivers. See CPL 201, *Caring for Children of Prisoners*.

## **Temperament and Coping**

While the developmental norms will guide adults in understanding children’s reactions to parental incarceration, it is also useful to be reminded of the unique aspects of each child. Children in similar situations with parents facing similar charges may react in widely different ways to their parents’ arrest and incarceration. Children within the same family even react quite differently. For decades, theorists have looked at

9 temperament characteristics as a way of explaining the widely varying behaviors exhibited by different children at the same stages of development in the same and differing home environments.

Nine temperament qualities described here focus on infants and toddlers. Many children maintain these characteristics into adulthood. Using these nine temperamental characteristics, clinicians can help caregivers to understand the child’s innate reaction patterns and unique strengths and weaknesses as well as to see how their own temperament styles affect their interactions with the children.

These temperament qualities combine then, with the child’s experiences, relationships and environmental supports and stressors to form coping styles and patterns for children and for families. This notion of temperament is also a way of conceptualizing, not only how a child may behave in the wake of parental incarceration, but also how adults react to them.

## **Temperament Characteristics**

1. **Activity level.** Some babies are active. They kick a lot in the uterus before they are born, they move around in their bassinets, and as toddlers, they always run. Other babies are much less active.
2. **Rhythmicity.** Some babies have regular cycles of activity. They eat, sleep, and defecate on schedule almost

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from birth. Other babies are much less predictable.

3. **Approach-withdrawal.** Some babies delight in everything new; others withdraw from every new situation. The first bath makes some babies laugh and others cry; the first spoonful of cereal is gobbled up by one baby; and spit out by the next.
4. **Adaptability.** Some babies adjust quickly to change; others are unhappy at every disruption of their normal routine.
5. **Intensity of reaction.** Some babies chortle when they laugh and howl when they cry. Others are much calmer, responding with a smile or a whimper.
6. **Threshold or responsiveness.** Some babies seem to sense every sight, sound and touch. For instance, they waken at a slight noise, or turn away from a distant light. Others seem unaware even of bright lights, loud street noises, or wet diapers.
7. **Quality of mood.** Some babies seem constantly happy, smiling at almost everything. Others seem chronically unhappy; they are ready to complain at any moment.
8. **Distractibility.** All babies fuss when they are hungry; but some will stop fussing if someone gives them a pacifier or sings them a song, while others keep complaining until they are fed. Similarly, when babies spot an attractive but

dangerous object and reach for it, some of them can be distracted by another, safer object while others are more single-minded.

9. **Attention span.** Some babies play happily with one toy for a long time. Others quickly drop one activity for another.  
*(From: Chess & Thomas, 1977)*

Individual temperament characteristics do not, in and of themselves, create behavior problems or interfere with the child's adjustment to parental incarceration. Rather it is the fit (or lack of fit) between the child's temperament and the coping style and expectations of the adults that can cause distress for everyone.

Another aspect of temperament that can interfere with a child's coping is the degree to which a parent or caregiver identifies the temperament quality as similar or identical to themselves or the child's other parent. This can, of course, endear a child when those qualities are loved and appreciated in oneself or another.

More often, however, the presence of some temperament characteristics alienate the child when those qualities are repulsive or frustrating in oneself or others. For children with parents who have caused distress in the family, their likeness to the incarcerated parent can pose obstacles to attachment and cause the child to become the target for misplaced anger.

Understanding the role of temperament and the adults response to it (positive and negative) can help caregivers to see that things like intensity of the child's reactions, the

unpredictable moods, the rigidity with everyday functioning, or hypersensitivity to noise or touching may be part of the child's personality rather than caused by the family circumstances or bad parenting.

Understanding a child's temperament may also help caregivers to predict the child's reactions to new situations, to structure for long trips to visit a parent in prison or to be patient with the length of time a child takes to adjust to change.<sup>1</sup> Some children will be easy to read. Their behaviors will show clinicians and caregivers that they are reacting to the stress of parental incarceration. Others will not be so obvious. It is important to be aware that those children who seem to be coping well with a parent's arrest or incarceration may be silently suffering intense emotions. A child whose behavior seems "normal" may need just as much support as a child who is more obviously depressed or anxious.

## Family Dynamics and Capacity

How children cope with distress also depends on the capacity of the adults who care for them to protect and nurture them.

Most studies show that children who exhibit the most difficult behavior in the aftermath of parental incarceration have been subjected or exposed to multiple crises and stresses in the home. Drug and alcohol abuse, child maltreatment, domestic violence, foster care or multiple parental arrests may be a part of the child's history.

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A recent study by the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents found that many of the children they studied had been previously subjected to “prenatal drug exposure, substance abuse in the home, forced removal of the parent from the home at arrest, gang activity in the family, criminal acts, and/or the violent deaths of family members, each of which has been documented to produce traumatic stress reactions in childhood.”<sup>2</sup>

Current estimates are that between 60% and 80% of offenders abuse alcohol or drugs. Drug abusers can be erratic, neglectful parents. Their children are often emotionally neglected and feel that their parents have abandoned them for their drugs of choice. Addicted parents often do know they are neglectful. In fact, one definition of addiction is the continuation of a behavior in spite of knowing the consequences.<sup>3</sup>

There is some evidence, however that many drug and alcohol using parents do indeed feel responsible for their children and concerned about their well being but are unable to balance their addictions with parenting tasks and responsibilities even when they are aware of the negative impact on their children.<sup>4</sup>

All of this leaves children particularly vulnerable when a parent is arrested or incarcerated.

## Family Coping Styles

The following are patterns of coping that can help guide professional interventions. Remember, however, that each family is unique. Each will deal

with the incarceration of a family member in its own way.

### 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. Sometimes foster parents often have trouble coordinating visits. Often, inmates choose to limit contact with family when they are unable to cope with their feelings or the frustrations of correctional policies.

### The Turbulent Family

Negative feelings are expressed in out of control ways in this family. They are rarely 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. 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 the style of coping evident 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.

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- **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 and identity 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.

When the release from prison or jail finally comes, it creates a major crisis for most families. The inmate’s homecoming is likely to be shrouded by joblessness, economic hardship, or continuous poverty.

Children abandoned by one parent need to know that there is a consistent and caring adult there for them. The way in which the remaining parent (or other caregiver) is coping with the crisis, the amount and type of contact that the child has with the incarcerated parent and the caregiver’s relationship with the incarcerated parent will also have a profound effect on the child’s ability to cope.

When adults are aware of the child’s needs, emotions and temperament, stress will be considerably reduced. But the parent or caregiver may themselves be at risk for depression or anxiety disorders, placing children at further risk.

## Trauma

Parent-child separation can cause impaired parent to child bonding, attachment disruptions for children and increase the stress in the care giving family. Separation due to the incarceration of a

parent is also likely to cause trauma. This is especially true if children are present at the arrest of their parent, if there are multiple placements with family or foster care and if the arrest and incarceration create major changes in the child’s everyday life.

Enduring trauma occurs most often when the parental incarceration is only a part of an ongoing history of violence, inconsistent parental availability, abuse, addictions, chaos and repeated loss.

The loss of a parent to incarceration will often create major life disruptions. Changes in economic status, caregiver employment, and changes in residence, schools and community can strip children of what is familiar and comforting in the context of distress. These disruptions often combine with a “conspiracy of silence” that so often is required in families of prisoners, and subjects children of incarcerated parents to acute traumatic stress reactions.<sup>5</sup>

Social stigma and new surroundings keep children from talking to peers. Well-intentioned caregivers who attempt to distract and protect children from distress, will avoid conversations about the trauma and limit the availability of counseling. All of this leaves children to cope with PTSD symptoms and inadequate support to overcome the effects of the trauma.

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## Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Reduced involvement with peers and activities
- Numbness of responsiveness
- Constriction of emotion
- Dissociative states
- Foreshortened view of the future
- Flashbacks or intrusive recollections of the traumatic event
- Reenactment of the trauma through words or play
- Avoidance of traumatic cues (things or people that are reminders of the events)
- Lack of concentration
- Hyperarousal, hyperalertness
- Sleep disturbances
- Distractibility

From "Silent Victims: Children Who Witness Violence,"<sup>6</sup>

## Facts about the Crime and Sentence

The stigma of a parent's arrest will vary with the type of crime charged and the child's social context. If a parent is charged with a sexual crime, for example, a child will be subjected to intense feelings arising from the stigma attached to the crimes of rape or sexual abuse. For teens this may also be complicated by their emerging sexuality.

If there is suspected injustice related to racism, politics or police brutality and family and community rally around the incarcerated parent, children may join in and view the parent as an innocent victim even if they are guilty of the crime. For school aged children this can also challenge their developing sense of right and wrong. If racism and injustice are also a part of everyday life, children and adults may be at higher risk for depression.<sup>7,8</sup>

The length of sentence will also affect how a child copes with a parent's incarceration, as will the explanations given to them and the motivation of caregivers to maintain the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent over time. In some families, a sentence of two years may seem like too long a time to keep a child connected to a parent. In others, it will be perceived as too short to go through the aggravation... "He will be out before we know it."

The impact of the length of sentence will also be affected by the nature of the crime, previous incarcerations and the child's developmental capacity for understanding time.

## Outside Supports

Protective factors are outside supports that ease a child's distress, buffer them from risk and increase their capacity for survival. Those supports can be financial, social or emotional. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and other family and friends are most likely to buffer children of inmates. Teachers and others in the community can also play a powerful role in supplying a child with some of the needs

that aren't being met by the incarcerated parent.

Stories from children of prisoners tell how relationships made a positive difference - protecting them from risk.

*The crossing guard...he gave me a banana every morning and took me for haircuts and asked to see my report cards. If I got into trouble he would be upset with me ...I trusted him.*

*A school counselor...I went to see her once a week and all we talked about was hair and nails but I wouldn't miss those appointments for anything...She also told me I was smart.*

*A nurse at the clinic... taught me to tie my shoes and to whistle and every time I saw her she acted really glad to see me.*

*My third foster mother. She told me that no matter how many times I got into trouble, she would not give up on me.*

*The librarian that found me books that had kids with a parent in jail.*

Awareness of children's varying reactions to parental incarceration can increase the capacity of professionals and family members to protect children of prisoners from risk.

*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.*



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