



Children of Incarcerated Parents Discussion at the White House

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What are some of the unique challenges that children of incarcerated parents face?

Remarks by panelist Ann Adalist-Estrin

There is really one main challenge. That is the meaning that is made of the parents' incarceration by those around the child. In my 35 years working with families of the incarcerated and the programs that serve them, I have talked to thousands of young people: in my clinical practice, in focus groups, in trainings where I include young people and family members and in conversations with the college students I teach, I hear themes that all relate to meaning making.

Children experience parental incarceration as a loss, we know that. But what meaning is made of that loss? The incarceration of a family member is considered an "Adverse Childhood Experience" or ACEⁱ by those who study mental health and child development. 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. 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 ACEs to a variety of poor health outcomes in adulthood. These traumatic experiences in childhood cause what is now called toxic stress. 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. What we also know, is that parents are uniquely poised to be buffers for children experiencing toxic stress.ⁱⁱ So when we talk about a child losing a parent to incarceration and we are interpreting the ACEs literature only through a child maltreatment lens, the meaning that gets made (intentionally or not) is that children of incarcerated parents are maltreated children, harmed by their parents and thus better off without them. If however, the parents who are in prison or jail are seen as potential supports for these children, as buffers from the toxicity of the stress, then a different meaning is made of the loss. It becomes more profound and less dismissible. Joyce Ardittiⁱⁱⁱ talks about parental incarceration as an ambiguous loss and the meaning that gets made of that is that the parent is gone, not dead and their role in the child's life is unclear. But based on what the children have said, it may also be an ambiguous loss because the children's feelings are unclear as are the reactions of others.

Another unique aspect of the experience of having an incarcerated parent is the shame and stigma. The meaning that is often made of that is that the children are ashamed of their parents or their parents' crime. What the children have said is that they feel ashamed because of the reactions of...us. The body language and the words of teachers, coaches, social workers pastors and mentors, feels judgmental. When we train mentors and youth group leaders and camp counselors in programs designed for children with incarcerated parents, not to mention the parent unless the child brings it up, we must also train them to first let the child know that they know about the situation and are comfortable if the child ever wants to talk. Such training also needs to include practice in listening for how children "bring it up without bringing it up" as well as practice in how to respond effectively. The child who sees a red truck and says that's a cool truck, it's like the one my Dad had" is "bringing it up" and needs to know that it is ok with us to talk about Dad. We all must make a different meaning of the shame children feel and take on the responsibility of creating an atmosphere of safety and comfort for children to really choose whether or not to talk about their parents. When children feel the judgments and when those judgments combine with racism they feel doubly ashamed. When the judgments are accompanied by citations of statistics about being 70% or 5 to 6 times more likely than peers to go to prison themselves, the shame can feel unbearable. These statistics are not verifiable, and using them to attempt to get support for these children may be increasing the stigma, the anxiety and the toxic stress.^{iv}

When people are ashamed, they lie. We all do. And lies beget lies and the conspiracy of silence so common in families involved in the justice system is created. I have often talked and written about the 3 forms that the conspiracy of silence takes: not telling children the truth, often because of the shame and stigma parents and caregivers feel; telling children the truth but telling them not to tell anyone; and allowing that the truth be told but putting restrictions on talking about the incarcerated parent at home. This is the meaning I make of the conspiracy of silence. But the children tell me often that they never feel safe to really share their feelings about the parent, the caregiver, the crime or the injustice they perceive, unless there is a structure for it. Programs that bring children with incarcerated parents together help. When adults ask, listen to the answers and react with empathy, honesty and non-judgment children feel safe to talk. Otherwise, it is easier to lie.

And finally, there are the loyalty conflicts. The meaning that is made of this aspect of dealing with an incarcerated parent is that there is an internal conflict between loyalty to the incarcerated parent and to the caregiver. But recently a college student, who is the child of an incarcerated father, said to me "Why does incarceration negate the parent's importance to the child in the eyes of the world? If parents are the buffers from toxic stress, shouldn't people be doing everything they can to help keep those parent child bonds? Because the guilt I feel about needing my dad when everyone says I am better off without him, feels like a conflict of loyalty that is killing me inside.." ^v

The challenges of having an incarcerated parent are unique. The experience is different than divorce, different than having an absent parent and different than death. The main difference is the meaning that is made when we interpret research, when we design programs, policies and practices and when we talk with the children. In the film that was introduced here today by the Echoes of Incarceration Project, ^{vi} Mikey said "the things that make you uncomfortable are the things you need to keep talking about or they will never stop making you uncomfortable." All of us can make it safer for children of the

incarcerated to talk, by promoting and disseminating accurate data, encouraging family strengthening policies and practices and by developing training programs that include an emphasis on meaning making and self-awareness. And above all, these strategies must be implemented with significant input from the children and their families. The meaning they make should guide us.

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Arditti, J. (2012) *Parental Incarceration and the Family*

^{iv} Conway, J.M. & E. Jones (forthcoming) *Seven Out of Ten? Not Even Close.*

A Review of Longitudinal Research on the Likelihood of Children of Incarcerated Parents Becoming Offenders

^{iv} AAE personal communication with anonymous adult and used here with permission.

^{iv} For more information on the Echoes of Incarceration Project see [JADE CAN THE NEWSLETTER I SENT YOU LINK HERE?](#)