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Facts and Issues: CIPL 103



Conversations: Questions Children Ask

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

*Adapted from **How Can I Help?**, published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.*

A child needs contact with an incarcerated parent for the relationship to continue in a meaningful way. It also helps the child adjust to and heal from the separation. A child may have contact with an incarcerated mother or father by personal visits, letters, or phone calls. But the value of that contact often depends on the quality of the interaction and the content of the conversations.

Collect calls from prison are expensive and need to be kept short. Children are often not included in calls except for a fast greeting. Sometimes the children have so little to say that it seems that the conversation is meaningless. Yet, hearing the parent's voice, even for a short time, may be more reassuring than it seems.

Mail from an incarcerated parent is important to children. A post card, acknowledging an accomplishment or remembering a birthday or holiday, means a lot to all children. Children of incarcerated parents have little else to connect them to their parents, so mail from them is especially treasured.

But children of incarcerated parents need more than just contact from their parents and other adults. They need help coming to terms with what has happened. Children need a safe place to express their fears and feelings, and find answers to their questions.

There are 4 main questions that children ask or want to ask their incarcerated parents:

- Where are you?
- Why are you there?
- When are you coming home?
- Are you okay?

There are also 2 questions in the hearts and minds of children of incarcerated parents that they rarely ask. These questions are often “behind the scenes” in their conversations

- Do you blame me?
- Do you love me?

These questions can come in many forms. Some children ask them directly with straightforward language. Other children beat around the bush. Some act out their questions by getting into trouble or by confronting adults with challenging or aggressive behaviors.

The Answers Parents Give

Incarcerated parents, their children's caregivers and other interested adults should prepare to answer these questions. Sometimes parents are uncomfortable having these conversations. More often they are just not sure how to answer children's questions in ways that children will understand.

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Another issue is, who will answer the questions? An incarcerated parent who is active in the child's life will want to be the one to answer most of these questions. Children typically ask about the experiences of the incarcerated parent. These questions should be answered by that parent whenever possible. Sometimes, though, the job of answering these questions belongs only to the caregiver or other parent. In either case, children seem to respond best when their questions are answered simply and honestly.

This pamphlet was written to help incarcerated parents and the caregivers of their children as they try to answer children's questions. As painful as these conversations may be, parents and children will weather the separation best when children better understand the situation.

• **Where are you?**

Children's caretakers often try to protect children by avoiding the truth about the whereabouts of their incarcerated parent. There are several stories often used by parents and family members to answer the question "Where is Mom or Dad?" or "Where are you?"

Away at School

Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is "away at school." This lie rarely succeeds with school aged children who are old enough to understand that people (even college students) come home from school sometimes. Children of incarcerated parents may already have difficulty in school. It doesn't help to associate school with the pain of what feels like

Even if children do not see the prison, they are likely to overhear a conversation that will reveal the truth. In addition, most mail from inmates is clearly marked as originating in a correctional facility, so that the child (as well as the mailman and nosy neighbors) will have little difficulty figuring it out.

permanent separation from parents. It might even lead to, or exaggerate a dislike of going to school or doing school work.

Working Far Away

Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is "working far away." This may satisfy children at first, especially if there is not increased financial stress. But it is hard for children to understand why money is tighter if the parent went away to work. Why aren't they sending home money? Children could assume that a parent doesn't want to see them or they would come home on their days off.

In the military

Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is "in the military." This can give children a way to explain their parent's absence to their friends, especially if the parent's sentence is short. But in times of world conflict it usually leaves children afraid of war and danger. This can increase their worry and fear.

In the hospital

Sometimes children are told the incarcerated parent is "in the hospital." This can raise children's fear of doctors and hospitals, and increase anxiety over the health of the parent. When parents do not return home within a few days, many children imagine that the parent has died and that no one is telling them the truth.

Regardless of the story, these lies become exposed to the child sooner or later, usually sooner if the child is visiting the incarcerated parent. As children read, watch TV, and listen to people talk, they quickly learn what a prison is and how it differs from work, school or the military. Then the fact that the prison is not a school, hospital or military base becomes clear to them.

Even if children do not see the prison, they are likely to overhear a conversation that will reveal the truth. Most mail from prisoners is clearly marked as originating in a correctional facility, so the child (as well as the mailman and nosy neighbors) figures it out. If the prisoner calls home, the collect call operator usually says the call is from a prison.

Once children realize the truth, they feel lied to. They begin to develop distrust that hurts their relationships, especially with the person who made up the story.

Lying to the child is often intended to minimize feelings of shame and stigma associated with parental incarceration. But it increases these feelings by creating a family secret. A

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family secret is a big burden for a small child. Even when families tell children a parent is incarcerated, they often encourage the children not to tell others.

This is not necessarily bad advice, since children can be cruel. Other children may tease, isolate, or humiliate the child. Sadly, even school officials and parents of children's friends cannot be counted on to provide support to children of incarcerated parents. The child who has no one to share concerns with can pay a high emotional price for keeping a secret.

Parents and caregivers usually need to weigh three choices: tell the truth and let it be out in the open, tell the truth and ask children to keep it quiet, or make up a story. Parents and caregivers then have to judge the dangers of each option to the child's emotional health.

When the child knows the truth of **where** the parent is, they usually next ask **why**.

• **Why are you here?**

Children need the truth, and in most cases they should get it, either before or at a visit.

They are looking for a way to make sense out of what has happened. They become nervous and anxious if the answers they get do not make sense to them.

Keep in mind

- Children understand the idea of being punished for breaking rules.
- Young children need simple descriptions of the offense. "Dad hurt someone," or "Mom stole something," or "I took drugs," or "I sold drugs that are not allowed."
- Older children will have more questions and may need more detail.
- Truth is easier on kids than what they imagine.

Most children hear things about the crime either on the street or within the house or family. This knowledge will confuse them tremendously if they have not been told the truth.

Occasionally, incarcerated parents are innocent. For them and for their families, the frustration, and rage at the injustice of the system and the world is very real and can create tremendous hopelessness and despair.

An incarcerated parent may be guilty of a crime, but sentenced to time that is excessive. Many people wait months in jail before trial because they cannot afford bail.

An incarcerated parent may want to steadfastly maintain innocence, or believe the sentence is unfair, or consider bail excessive. These things need to be talked about without undermining a child's respect for appropriate and lawful authority or triggering fear and distrust.

When the focus is not so much on whether the incarcerated parent's circumstances are "fair," but on how the child's parents, counselors and teachers deal with unfairness, children can learn positive ways to advocate justice and fight discrimination and racism. Acknowledge that the incarcerated parent did something wrong and also that the criminal justice system unconsciously or unfairly added an extra penalty because the offender was African-American or Latino. Minority adolescents may need to know they are at greater risk of arrest, detention and incarceration and to be prepared for that possibility.

Often when one parent is incarcerated, children become overly concerned about and attached to the other parent or primary caretaker. They fear that s/he too will be taken away. Too much talk of how unjust the system is may increase the child's fear that the remaining parent may be taken away next.

Many incarcerated parents, who are guilty as charged, struggle with the fear of being rejected if their loved ones knew the truth. They say they are innocent to keep their families.

Many children are extremely angry. They feel abandoned by parents who risked incarceration by their conflict with the law.

In most cases, the incarcerated parent simply needs to apologize to the child for the upset and upheaval that s/he has caused. They need to ask the child to forgive and to be a partner in rebuilding their lives.

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It takes courage to have these conversations. It means risking anger and rejection. It means admitting causing pain to those you love.

The child's caregiver, and other adults in the child's life, can help by supporting the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent. This support helps build the honesty that is required for parents and children to sustain their family bonds through this crisis.

The incarcerated parent, the child's caregiver, and outside parties such as social workers may disagree about what to say about the arrest and incarceration. This can be hard to resolve. If the incarcerated parent is concerned about how the information about her/him is to be presented, it may be best if s/he is given the opportunity to share it directly. Hopefully, s/he can be persuaded that the child is going to learn the truth eventually, and hearing it directly from the incarcerated parent is the best way to hear it.

For more information on this topic, see: *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System* by David Cole. The New Press, New York, 1999 and *Raising Black Children* by Comer, J. and Poussaint, A.. Plume, NY 1992.

- **When are you coming home?**

Throughout the entire process from arrest to release, there is often tremendous uncertainty about when an incarcerated parent will come home.

Most people know the range of possible outcomes: the maximum sentence one could receive if found guilty as charged, the sentence available if the defendant accepts the plea bargain offered, or the chance that the case will be dismissed altogether. For some, denial is so great that they never seem to consider the possibility of a prison or jail sentence. Their instinct is to reassure their children that they will be out soon. When children seem distressed about a parent's incarceration, and beg their parents to come home, parents naturally want to offer relief. They often say "soon" or "It won't be long now." A child expecting a parent to come home from prison is devastated when the parent fails to arrive.

Children handle all this uncertainty best when they have honest answers - even when that means saying "I really don't know." Young children do best when they measure time in seasons or holidays. "It looks like Mommy will be home after 3 summers or 5 birthdays." Longer sentences sound long no matter what adults say to soften it. "Dad will probably get out when you are 18" is truly a lifetime to a 6 year old. Children are very concrete, though. The truth is easier for them to grasp than vague answers like "It will be a long time."

When talking about when a parent is coming home, remember to consider where "home" is going to be.

There are children whose parents will be released from jail or prison, but will not be living with the child. Sometimes, when the

parent wasn't living with the child before the arrest, it is clearly understood that s/he won't be living with the child after release. But the arrest or incarceration of a parent often impacts not only on the child's custody but also on the parent's relationship to a spouse/lover. The free world parent may find someone new while the partner is in prison. Children may imagine longed for reunions or family living situations. The harmfulness of these fantasies can be reduced when parents are honest about their plans.

- **Are you okay?**

Mostly, the child wants to be reassured that the incarcerated parent is safe, secure, and able to manage the difficult circumstances. Children are very sensitive to their environments. Many children travel home from prison visits in silence or in tears because they are deeply distressed over separating from the parent. They also feel they are abandoning their beloved parent to a dreadful place.

Some parents would like to assure the child that they are safe and happy, but unfortunately, they cannot. Prison is not an OK place to be. It is not necessary to tell children the horrors of incarceration to teach them that imprisonment is a punishment. It will only worry them.

Answers to the question "Are you OK?" such as "I am not OK in here but I can certainly handle it. Or "I am OK in some ways. I have a bed and food and books to read. But I am not OK because

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prison is not a good place to be. And most of all I can't be with you." These kinds of answers balance the truth with some reassurance that the parent misses the child and is not in severe danger.

- **Do you love me? Do you blame me?**

These are not questions that children ask directly. Yet the purpose of much of the communication discussed throughout this pamphlet is directed to answering these questions: "Do you love me?" and "Do you blame me?" The goal is to insure that the child does in fact feel loved by the incarcerated parent and others, and does not feel responsible in any way for the terrible circumstances in which the family finds itself.

Children often blame themselves for their parent's mistakes. A child who pressured parents for an expensive gift may think that the parent's subsequent arrest for selling drugs was related to an effort to get the desired object. Similarly, a child who has been angry at the parent may believe the subsequent arrest was somehow caused by their negative thoughts about the parent.

Parents generally see little connection between their criminal activity and their children, and certainly do not commit a crime for the purpose of abandoning their families. But children often interpret the parent's behavior solely in connection to themselves." If you cared about me you wouldn't have gone to jail (left me)."

Tell a child her/his incarcerated parent will be home from prison by Christmas, and s/he will be looking out the window every night starting on Thanksgiving. The disappointment when the parent fails to arrive is devastating.

Parents should be unwavering in their assurances that the child is loved unconditionally. That the child did nothing to cause the incarceration.

The issues raised by these questions and conversations are complex and emotional. Children of incarcerated parents, their parents and caregivers all need support from those around them. Many of the pamphlets in the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library can assist caregivers, professionals and community members in this process.

For more information on this topic see:

- Alexander M. (2011). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: New Press.
- <http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/index.cfm>

About the Children of Incarcerated Parents Library (CIPL)

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