

Working With Children of Prisoners

Meeting the challenge

Nearly 2 million children have at least one parent in prison, and more than 7 million have a parent under some form of State or Federal correctional supervision. That's close to 2 of every 100 children.

These figures suggest that whether or not your agency specifically focuses on children of prisoners, you will likely encounter this population. It is therefore important to have knowledge of the special needs of children of prisoners.

In most ways, these children grow up just like other children, but they also face an additional set of challenges. Children who have one or more parents in prison:

- must deal with separation from a parent (often for undetermined periods of time with infrequent visitation);
- often face social stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent; and
- may live in unstable or chaotic environments.

Tips for working with children of prisoners:

- Connect children to a range of counseling, healthcare, and educational services for the whole family, including siblings and caregivers. When possible and in the expressed interest of children and caregivers, it may be beneficial to include the incarcerated parents.
- Link children to positive role models, such as mentors or tutors.
- Create opportunities for children of incarcerated parents to interact and support each other. Always take care that these activities do not stigmatize children of prisoners among their peers.
- Provide supportive relationships with caring adults by seeking quality staff and volunteers who are able to commit to working with the children for at least 6 months.
- Provide opportunities for children of incarcerated parents to have new experiences and to test out positive leadership roles.
- Recruit staff and volunteers who have life or work experiences that allow them to be sensitive and nonjudgmental to these children.
- Maintain age-appropriate resources on various aspects of parental incarceration, such as children's books that discuss visiting a parent in prison.
- Stress and enforce client confidentiality.
- Create an atmosphere where children feel comfortable--but not forced--to express their feelings about their parents' incarceration.
- Respect the delicate custody arrangements that often exist in families impacted by incarceration. Assess what role the incarcerated parent plays in the life of the family and incorporate that individual's input, feedback, and involvement in agency activities and services, as appropriate.
- For caregivers and children who desire a relationship with the incarcerated parent, help facilitate letter-writing, video-teleconferencing, or audio messages.

Resources

Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

www.e-ccip.org

Family and Corrections Network

www.fcnetwork.org

Federal Resource Center for Children of Prisoners

www.childrenofprisoners.org

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

www.prisonerswithchildren.org

NCFY's Mentoring Children of Prisoners Bibliography

ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/publications/mcp-biblio.htm

Working With Children of Prisoners was developed by the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (NCFY) for the Family and Youth Services Bureau; Administration on Children, Youth and Families; Administration for Children and Families; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information on positive ways to work with youth, please go to ncfy.acf.hhs.gov, or contact NCFY at (301) 608-8098 or ncfy@acf.hhs.gov.

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