



# Supporting Families Impacted by Incarceration

On December 12, 2017 and January 17, 2018, CANTASD (the National Child Abuse and Neglect Technical Assistance and Strategic Dissemination Center) hosted a two-part Digital Dialogue with Ann Adalist-Estrin, director of the National Resource Center for Children and Families of the Incarcerated. This document summarizes what we heard from 209 participants from around the country.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

This first Digital Dialogue focused on what we know—and what there is not enough data to fully understand—about the children, parents, and caregivers impacted by incarceration. Drawing on data that includes both prisons and jails, Adalist-Estrin provided an estimate of the number of children with an incarcerated parent—as many as 2.7 million. She summarized what research is telling us about the adverse effects of incarceration on children, their parents, and those who care for children while a parent is incarcerated. She noted that the research indicates that families impacted by incarceration experience a unique form of toxic stress.<sup>1,2</sup>

## SUMMARY OF PROMISING PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES IMPACTED BY INCARCERATION

The second Digital Dialogue built upon Adalist-Estrin's work training child welfare workers to work with families impacted by incarceration. In it, Adalist-Estrin offers six key action steps for working effectively with these families:

1. Check yourself/know yourself.
2. Create a safe space for families.
3. Support child well-being.
4. Engage with the incarcerated parent.
5. Support the child's relationship with the incarcerated parent.
6. Collaborate with community partners.

Adalist-Estrin outlined key strategies for workers around each of these steps. For more on each digital dialogue, download the slides or watch the recordings using the links in the box above.

### Find Related Resources:

- Access the Digital Dialogue recordings, slides, and materials:
  - » [Understanding the Issues](#)
  - » [A Dialogue on Practice Skills](#)
- Visit CANTASD's [topic page on Families Impacted by Incarceration](#) to learn more.
- [Stay connected](#) to our ongoing work in this area.

1 Turney, K. (2014). Stress proliferation across generations? Examining the relationship between parental incarceration and childhood health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 55(3), 302-319.

2 Turanovic, J. J., Rodriguez, N., & Pratt, T. C. (2012). The collateral consequences of incarceration revisited: A qualitative analysis of the effects on caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. *Criminology*, 50(4), 913-959.

## Discussion

The Q&A provided a forum for a robust discussion of issues surrounding parental incarceration and child welfare involvement. This section summarizes and paraphrases the participants' questions and the presenter's responses. *The comments and information shared in this report do not represent the official views of, or endorsement by, CANTASD, the Children's Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS.*

### CAN'T IT BE HARMFUL OR TRAUMATIC FOR A CHILD TO VISIT THEIR PARENT IN PRISON?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** If the parent's incarceration is due to harm they caused their child or family, visits can cause trauma; but the vast majority of children with incarcerated parents (97%) have not been harmed directly by their incarcerated parent in terms of abuse or neglect. The question is, which is the greater trauma for a child—visiting the parent, or being separated from the parent?

School difficulty is a common problem for children with incarcerated parents; but kids who are separated from incarcerated parents have difficulty in school whether they see the parent or not. There is not a lot of good research on this, but the emotional dysregulation that comes from having an incarcerated parent seems to be helped by seeing the parent.

### HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH KIDS' NEGATIVE REACTIONS WHEN THEY HAVE VISITS AND CONTACTS?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** The reasons for the negative reactions are varied. If a child has been traumatized by a parent and they are forced to visit, there could be a secondary trauma. But most often children respond negatively after visits because it's really stressful to see a parent or someone you miss and love and then have to leave them again. Military families have similar experiences. When a military parent is home on leave and has to go back, the children may have trouble in school and be really emotional for days or weeks afterwards. Does that mean the military parent should not come home on his or her next leave? The answer is always no. The issue is understanding when children have negative reactions because it's really painful for them to say hello and goodbye and helping them adjust.

### WHAT SPECIAL CHALLENGES DO INCARCERATED FATHERS FACE?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Parental identity is so important for incarcerated fathers, but many of them give up their parental identity if someone at home doesn't keep it going. A lot of incarcerated fathers just stop feeling like fathers. There is some evidence that this parental identity is connected positively to lower recidivism and post-parole success. Correctional facilities, as well as other systems, should pay attention to providing services to fathers such as parenting classes and post-incarceration transition planning. We're still working on that, and we're still trying hard to figure out ways to include fathers in their children's lives—especially for kids in child welfare.

### ARE THERE SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES WHO ARE NOT CONNECTED TO CHILD WELFARE?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** In New Jersey, the Department of Children and Families primarily offers informational support for family caregivers. For example, they deliver [Sesame Street](#) and other materials to caregivers that explain how to talk to kids about parental incarceration, how to tell them the truth. Some agencies and local offices also offer structural support, such as support groups or respite care for caregivers. I don't know a lot of services in other states for families whose children are not in foster care.

#### Learn More:

- [Children of Incarcerated Parents Library](#), National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated
- [Child Welfare Practice With Families Affected by Parental Incarceration](#), Child Welfare Information Gateway
- [Incarceration Tool Kit](#), Sesame Street
- [Safeguarding Children of Incarcerated Parents](#), International Association of Chiefs of Police



## HOW EFFECTIVE ARE PRISON NURSERIES?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** I think that prison nurseries for pregnant mothers are really critical to attachment. Ten states now have prison nurseries. Research conducted by Mary Byrne indicates that the children who are born in prison nurseries and get to stay there until they're 18 months old score much better on attachment measures, and the recidivism rate for the moms in these programs is very low.<sup>3,4</sup> They are costly, however. People tend to have negative impressions of prison nursery programs because babies are in prisons—even though the environment in prison nurseries is very child friendly and supportive to the parent-child relationship.

## HOW CAN FOSTER PARENTS HELP CHILDREN STAY CONNECTED WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Foster parents can help by encouraging letters, phone calls, and visits for children. I think visits, phone calls, letters, and the parent's voice on tape are critical to the attachment process, even for very young children. Even the smell of a parent is important to a very young child. Foster parents could, for instance, find out what mom's detergent or lotion is inside the facility and make sure that the infant or toddler's sheets or blanket have the same scent. When they visit the incarcerated parent, the scent will create comfort and familiarity.

## ARE CHILDREN'S VISITS TO INCARCERATED PARENTS SUPERVISED VISITS?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Most visits within child welfare are considered professional visits in many facilities. In this context, when kids are taken to visit parents, they would be accompanied and supervised and the visit would not take place the larger visiting room. For children with kinship caregivers, there are huge differences from state to state. In some states, children accompanied to visits by a relative are not necessarily supervised by anyone other than the relative caregiver. In other states, relative caregivers are considered part of foster care. Their visits will be accompanied or supervised, or both. In addition, depending on the clearance level and classification of the parent and whether it's a state facility or a local jail, they may be non-contact visits through Plexiglas.

## HOW DO WE ENSURE POSITIVE CHILD OUTCOMES FROM VISITS?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Ideally, visits should be child friendly and there should be preparation for the visit on the part of the incarcerated parent, the caregiver, and the child. The fact is that those things hardly ever all happen. There are few supports for incarcerated parents before and after visits, and likewise for caregivers and for children. Preparation can contribute to a more effective, helpful, and positive visit. For instance, children can be asked before the visit, "What do you want to talk to daddy or mommy about?" After the visit, instead of barraging the child with questions, ask, "What was something that was really fun about seeing mom, and what was something that was hard?" Be aware that most visits are going to be negative to a certain extent, however, because children will experience grief and loss.

## HOW OLD SHOULD THE CHILD BE BEFORE HE OR SHE VISITS AN INCARCERATED PARENT?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** It depends on the relationship between the child and the parent, and between child and caregiver. Lots of people take infants and toddlers to visit incarcerated parents. Our website (<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu>) has ideas for helping babies and toddlers have an easier time with these visits. For pre-school and school-age children, it depends a lot on what they are told. When children are not told the truth, visits are going to feel really uncomfortable because they can sense that something is wrong. For the most part, visits for children of all ages have been successful when the child has had a relationship with that parent—but most importantly, when the person accompanying them on the visit is someone they know and trust.

3 Byrne, M.W., Goshin, L.S., & Joestl, S.S. (2010). Intergenerational transmission of attachment for infants raised in a prison nursery. *Attachment and Human Development*, 12(4), 375-393.

4 Goshin, L.S., Byrne, M.W., & Henninger, A.M. (2013). Recidivism after release from a prison nursery program. *Public Health Nursing*, 31(2), 109-117.

## HOW CAN PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN INCARCERATED GET INVOLVED IN HELPING CHILDREN IMPACTED BY INCARCERATION?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Start locally. Look for programs serving children of incarcerated parents and their families, and find out in what capacity you could be involved. One hurdle is that many child-related programs will not hire or engage someone with a felony offense, though some only exclude those with child-related felonies. In Pennsylvania, many formerly incarcerated parents are involved in book drives that provide children's books for the waiting areas in all the state prisons. They are expanding this effort to implement programs that provide the incarcerated parent with the books that their child is reading in school. Look on the [NRCCFI website](#) for programs in your region, and connect with us to learn about local and even some national programs.

## HOW CAN WE IMPROVE PARENTING PROGRAMS FOR PRISON POPULATIONS?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Many programs for incarcerated parents are adapted from programs that were not designed, normed, or evaluated for families dealing with incarceration. For example, I was observing a program not too long ago in a state prison in the Midwest. They were talking about nutrition and the basic food groups in the parenting class, and one incarcerated mom said, "I'm sitting here struggling with whether or not I am going to be able to manage out there and not go back to drugs and prostitution, and I just can't concentrate right now on the five food groups." It really touched me when she said that. We have received positive feedback on programs that deal with the real issues that happen when people get out.

In a positive trend, we are seeing more and more parenting programs in prisons and jails. Unfortunately, it's hard for people to access them. Because the turnover is so great in prisons and waiting lists for these programs are long, most incarcerated parents tell us that they don't get to complete the entire parenting class.

### Programs to Explore:

- [Parenting Inside Out](#) is an evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral parent management skills training program designed for incarcerated parents.
- Washington State's [Prison Alternatives Program](#) allows parents to either exit prison early or complete sentences in their homes with supervision. The program has a structured parenting component.
- Several call participants recommended the [ACT Raising Safe Kids Program](#). Developed by the American Psychological Association Violence Prevention Office, it teaches positive parenting skills to parents and caregivers of children from birth to age 8.

## HOW CAN WE KEEP CHILDREN FROM ENTERING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM SOLELY BECAUSE THE PARENT IS INCARCERATED?

**Ann Adalist-Estrin:** Start with the International Association of Chiefs of Police protocol on safeguarding children of arrested parents.<sup>5</sup> It offers a differential approach to calling in child protective services when arresting a parent. If a parent tells you there is a good resource person for the child, and that person has a clear background check, there's no real reason to put kids into the child welfare system. Variations in the policies and practices of individual child welfare agencies determine who gets placed in the child welfare system when a parent is arrested. Decisions can be influenced by individual judgments, racism, difficulties determining what's in the best interest of the child, and differing concepts of what child well-being is.

On the correction side, of course, we could think about alternatives to incarceration—but from the child welfare side, we need to question whether we are making assumptions that a person involved in a criminal activity cannot be a good parent. If we find ourselves making that assumption, we should question ourselves; our agencies; and our policies, practices, and philosophies about children and families impacted by incarceration.

**DO YOU WANT TO SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVES ON THESE QUESTIONS WITH US? JOIN US ON SOCIAL MEDIA:**  
**FACEBOOK:** [FACEBOOK.COM/CANTASD](https://www.facebook.com/CANTASD) **TWITTER:** [TWITTER.COM/CANTASDCENTER](https://twitter.com/CANTASDCENTER)

<sup>5</sup> International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2014). *Safeguarding children of arrested parents*. Retrieved from <https://www.bja.gov/publications/iacp-safeguardingchildren.pdf>.