

# Supporting Students With Incarcerated Parents

*Students with incarcerated parents need support to stay connected to school and be successful academically and socially.*

**By Eric Rossen**

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*Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).*

**P**atrice, now 16 years old, has lived with her grandmother since her mother was first incarcerated 14 years ago. As a young child, Patrice used to feel extreme sadness, guilt, and confusion over her mother's incarceration. As an adolescent, she feels anger, shame, and embarrassment about her family's history as well as her financial situation, which is strained because her grandmother is raising Patrice and her two younger brothers on Social Security payments. Patrice tries her best in school and usually completes her homework, but she is thinking about getting a part-time job to help with bills and earn some spending money so that she can go out with her friends.

## Challenges for Students

Approximately 1.7 million children, or 2.3% of the entire US population of children under age 18 years, have a parent in state or federal prison. Approximately half of all minor children with parents in prison are between the ages of 10 and 17 years, and more than a third will reach age 18 years while their parent remains incarcerated (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). Many incarcerated parents have little contact with their children because they don't have permission, don't want to, feel ashamed, or are separated by large geographical distances; in fact, many students will go through secondary school without a meaningful connection to or support from their incarcerated parents.

Students with incarcerated parents often have experienced long-term, chronic stressors and may experience significant changes, such as moving from their homes, schools, districts, or states. Although most end up remaining with the nonincarcerated parent (84%), their home environment often changes dramatically because of such factors as financial distress, increased responsibility for the remaining parent, social isolation, and social stigma. Others may end up with relatives (some of whom they may not know well at all), and a small percentage end up in foster homes or in the care

of child protective agencies (2.9%) (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010).

Many students with incarcerated parents achieve positive outcomes through resilience, adaptability, and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, parent criminality and incarceration can increase an adolescent's risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including emotional and behavioral problems, academic difficulties, and future incarceration (Lopez & Bhat, 2007; Simmons, 2000). In addition, those who witness their parents' arrests are more likely to experience nightmares, flashbacks, and increased levels of traumatic stress (Phillips & Zhao, 2010).

Having an imprisoned parent can lead to stigma and social isolation for adolescents (Braman & Wood, 2003). This is particularly problematic because secondary students attach great value to peer relationships—spending time with peers, acceptance from classmates, and appearance are often viewed by adolescents as more important than academics. Not surprisingly, the quality of peer relations can significantly influence psychosocial adjustment and identity development for adolescents (Harter, 1997), and positive relationships can help diminish social anxiety and symptoms of depression (La Greca & Moore Harrison, 2005). Further, those students will likely not receive the same sympathy

or support as another student whose parent is absent because of other causes (e.g., military deployment or chronic illness).

Although the challenges faced by students with incarcerated parents are significant, they differ on the basis of students' ages. Secondary students whose parents were incarcerated when they were younger may have experienced disrupted social and cognitive development, damaged parental relationships, lack of coping or problem-solving skills, decreased academic performance, and emotional instability (Miller, 2006)—problems that may continue to be barriers to learning through high school, even if the parent has since returned to the household. Adolescents whose parents are currently incarcerated may feel significant shame and embarrassment, engage in risk-taking or criminal behavior, and be less likely to adhere to boundaries set within classrooms, the school, or the community at large. Because they are ashamed, some will not report that they have an incarcerated parent to school staff members.

## Recommendations

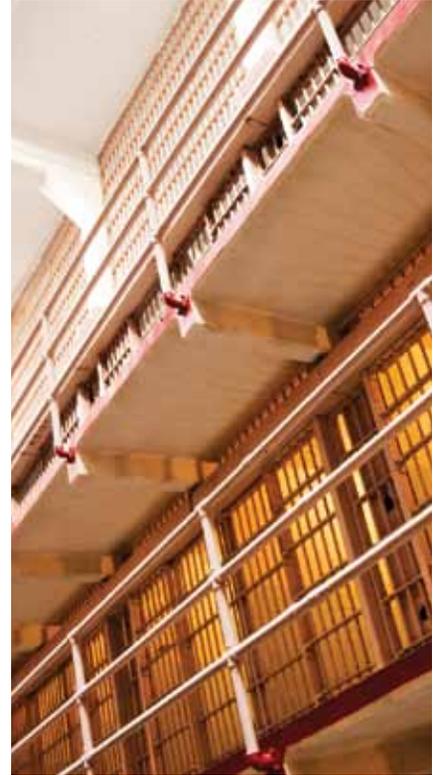
### Increase student connectedness.

Feeling connected to caring adults in school can improve academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes (Johnson, 2006). Reassure students that someone is always available to talk and help them focus on their positive attributes. Without such relationships, the school may never find out that a parent had been incarcerated in the first place. Increasing students' connectedness to school can also encourage their participation in before- and after-school activities, which may be particularly important if they have little supervision after school.

**Encourage activities.** Students with parents in jail often isolate themselves from others (Braman & Wood, 2003). Schools can help by engaging the student in after-school activities, group projects, and team sports or clubs. The school psychologist, the school counselor, or the school social worker may consider including students in meetings or counseling sessions with small groups of peers to help decrease isolation and facilitate the development of a social network. Stigma can be reduced by educating students and faculty members about the myths and realities of prisons and jails.

**Forge relationships with remaining caregivers.** The outcomes for students with incarcerated parents are largely determined by the physical and mental health of the remaining parents, but those caregivers may be particularly stressed and possibly distrustful of others. Consider sharing positive news with the remaining parents about their children or touching base about upcoming assignments or projects. Ask student support personnel to offer workshops that teach parents how to set up structures at home to encourage academic success. Partnerships can provide consistency and structure between home and school.

**Anticipate difficult days.** Some students will have particular difficulty concentrating and focusing on learning during days that are reminders of the parent's incarceration, such as birthdays, Father's Day or Mother's Day, the anniversary of the arrest, or trial dates. Even a parent's reentry into the home has the potential to be stressful. During these days, knowing a student's triggers and providing caring reassurances can go a long way.



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## Support Online

- **A Caregiver's Guide on How to Explain Jails and Prisons to Children** [www.starsmp.org/PDFs/explaining\\_prison\\_final.pdf](http://www.starsmp.org/PDFs/explaining_prison_final.pdf)
- **Arizona Stars**  
[www.starsmp.org](http://www.starsmp.org)
- **Family and Corrections Network (FCN)**  
<http://fcnetwork.org>
- **Project Resilience**  
[www.projectresilience.com/tgintro.htm](http://www.projectresilience.com/tgintro.htm)
- **Family to Family, California**  
[www.f2f.ca.gov/res-YouthParents.htm](http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res-YouthParents.htm)
- **The Osborne Association**  
[www.osborneny.org](http://www.osborneny.org)
- **San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents**  
[www.sfcipp.org](http://www.sfcipp.org)

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Anticipate that the student may also have to miss school from time to time if the family plans to visit the incarcerated parent.

**Support students when they visit incarcerated parents.** Although many students return from visiting an incarcerated parent feeling calm and reassured, others may feel stressed, angry, guilty, or neglected. In some cases, students are not allowed to have physical contact with their parent or their visits are shorter than expected. Some prisons or jails have dress codes, and violating that dress code would disallow the student from seeing his or her parent. Prisons and jails may have age requirements for visitation as well. If possible, call on student support personnel to help prepare the student for an upcoming visit by discussing details ahead of time or by researching the rules of the prison online.

**Focus on the positive.** Educators are always encouraged to find the students' positive attributes, regardless of their academic performance or behavior in school. This practice becomes even more important for children of the incarcerated. Some frequently observed positive attributes among these students may include assertiveness, resolve, independence, self-sufficiency, adaptability, and family loyalty. During difficult times, consider reminding students how they handled previous stressful experiences in positive ways.

**Be flexible.** Some students may be asked to find a job to make up for the lost income of the incarcerated parent, or they may be asked to help take care of younger siblings or take on other household responsibilities, leaving little time for homework. Although expectations for students should remain high, being too rigid can also set students up for failure.

Use professional judgment in providing flexibility with assignments and extended deadlines.

### **Maintain high expectations.**

Expectations placed on students from educators and administrators, positive or negative, affect actual performance. Some educators or administrators lower their expectations of students who have incarcerated parents, often with good intentions. This may further hamper the students' academic and social development. Expectations for students to work hard and do their best should never be compromised. Offering flexibility should not be confused with lowering standards. Those principles apply for both academic and behavioral expectations.

**Monitor students' behavior and academic progress.** Many students will not show any changes following a parent's incarceration. Nevertheless, schools should regularly monitor students who are at risk for changes in behavior or sudden drops in academic performance and ask adults whom the students trust to discuss any concerns before the problems become severe. Administrators may consider having a multidisciplinary team regularly monitor students using such indicators as disciplinary referrals, academic performance, attendance, and existing knowledge of environmental stressors. School psychologists are particularly adept at collecting data, designing methods for data collection, and evaluating progress.

**Provide extra sets of clothing, food, and materials to help meet basic needs.** Some families may face added financial hardships because they have lost a source of income or must pay legal bills. They may eventually have difficulty paying utility or other bills, leaving some students hungry or without an opportunity to maintain proper

## Reentry

*Reentry* refers to a prisoner's release, reentrance into society, and return to the family. Although many families may rejoice at the parent's return, others may find this time distressful because they must again readjust and restructure the family dynamic. How much the parent and the child communicated may dictate how easy or difficult it will be to reestablish a functional relationship.

One commonly noted concern is the parent's difficulty acknowledging or recognizing the development of their child while in jail, which often leads to the parent treating the child the same as he or she did before incarceration. This can create additional tension, because the average prison term can last approximately six and a half to eight and a half years—leading a returning parent to treat a junior or senior in high school like a 9- or 10-year-old.

Some lifestyle factors that may predict the ease of reentry include:

- The family structure

- Substance abuse within the home
- Social and emotional support networks
- The parent's employment history
- The parent's criminal history.

The experiences of the parent while in prison that may predict the ease of reentry include:

- Whether the parent obtained a degree, such as a GED
- The amount of contact with family members
- The length of the prison term
- The parent's mental and physical health.

### Sources

- Herman-Stahl, M., Kan, M. L., & McKay, T. (2008). *Incarceration and the family: A review of research and promising approaches for serving fathers and families*. Triangle Park: RTI International.
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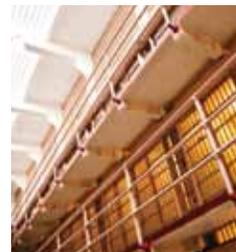
hygiene. Such events can severely impair learning; consider making extra sets of clean clothes or snacks available to those students.

**Encourage students' communication with incarcerated parents.** Less than 25% of incarcerated parents maintain monthly contact with their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). In some cases, such as if the incarcerated parent was abusive, having a parent removed from the home may help create a more secure and stable environment at home, but maintaining correspondence with a removed parent may also give the student an outlet for feelings of separation and loss (Johnston, 1995). School staff members can give students opportunities to draft letters or offer to help edit, revise, and discuss them in writ-

ing exercises that involve all students identifying a person whom they miss (e.g., deceased relative, deployed military parent, or an incarcerated parent) and writing a letter to that person.

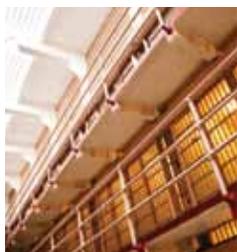
### Summary

Given the rise in the number of students with incarcerated parents, and the difficulties those students experience in school, educators and administrators must learn how to support them. Administrators are encouraged to follow the recommendations provided and use their professional judgment when working with these students. The cornerstone to providing this support is increasing school connectedness. Doing so can mitigate the negative outcomes of parent incarceration and improve behavior and academic success. **PL**



## Basic Facts About Incarceration

- At midyear in 2007, approximately 810,000 prisoners reported having minor children.
  - The majority (more than 744,000) of incarcerated parents are men, but the number of children with a mother in prison has more than doubled (131% increase) since 1991, compared with a 77% growth in fathers during the same time period.
  - Black students are 7.5 times more likely and Hispanic students are 2.5 times more likely to have a parent in prison than White students.
  - Forty percent of incarcerated fathers are Black, 30% are White, and 20% are Hispanic; in contrast, 48% of incarcerated mothers are White, 28% Black, and 17% Hispanic.
  - Approximately 48% of parents in prison report having lived with at least one of their children within the month before arrest or just prior to incarceration.
  - More than half of parents in state prisons provided the primary source of financial support for their children before being incarcerated.
- Source:** Glaze, L. E., & Maruschak, L. M. (2010). Parents in prison and their minor children (*Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report No. NCJ 222984*). Retrieved from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>



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