



background

Report # 129

Children of Incarcerated Parents

November 2011

Children With A Parent In Prison

Contact has its benefits *But outcomes depend on many factors*

What outcomes can be expected when children are able to have contact with a parent in a prison or jail? The answer, according to researchers, is, it depends. The benefits for children can be positive, such as a boost to their self-esteem. Or, a prison visit might trigger bad behavior. Inmates may be less likely to have symptoms of depression, or visits may make it more emotionally difficult for them to serve their sentences.

Studies suggest the reason for such mixed findings is that outcomes are sensitive to several factors ranging from the quality of child-parent prison visits to the relationship between a child's caregiver at home and the parent who is incarcerated.

Parent-Child Relationships

The relationship between parent and child is very important in early childhood, with the quality of early attachment being a critical factor influencing a child's social and emotional functioning later in life. Studies that examined these relationships as an outcome of contact between children and incarcerated parents offer mixed findings, but suggest outcomes are sensitive to quality of the contact.

Visits with parents in correctional facilities, for example, have been associated with insecure attachment relationships among children ranging in age from 30 months to 14 years. But in those cases, the visits took place in prison environments described as not being child friendly.

Studies also suggest that negative outcomes related to child visits are more likely to be reported when visits are not paired with interventions aimed at improving the qual-

ity of child-parent contact and the child-friendliness of the prison or jail setting. But children tend to benefit from visits that take place within the context of an intervention at the jail or prison that is focused on raising the quality of contact and making the setting less stressful to children.

In one study of a program for fathers in a federal prison and their young children reported that children's self-esteem increased across the 10-week program. One of the features of the program was a weekly parent-child visit during which the fathers would interact and have physical contact with their children in a child-friendly setting.¹

Studies also suggest that no matter how difficult maintaining contact with an incarcerated parent can be, not having contact can result in children having negative feelings about their relationships with their parents, including feeling of alienation.

The rise in the nation's prison population poses risks to a growing number of children with incarcerated parents, such as developmental challenges and a greater likelihood that they, too, will end up behind bars.

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Early Attachment

Recognizing that early childhood is a critical time in the development of attachment relationships, a few jails and prisons with nurseries and other child-focused programs make an effort to encourage contact between incarcerated mothers and their infants and young children.

For nearly two decades, one New York correctional facility has operated a program that allows incarcerated mothers to live with their newborns for the child's first year. Infants who lived with their mothers in the prison nursery program for at least one year were found to be more likely to have secure attachments than infants who were discharged from the nursery prior to one year.²

Problem Behavior

Studies report mixed findings about the relationship between children's

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contact with incarcerated parents and their behavior toward teachers, caregivers, peers and others.

For example, a study of 58 adolescent children of incarcerated mothers, reported that fewer instances of school drop-out and suspensions were linked to more mother-child contact, which included phone calls, visits and letters.³ But another study found more attention problems among children when they visited an incarcerated parent more often.⁴ Teachers reported that students often had trouble concentrating in school following weekend visits to the jail or prison.

Caregiver Relationships

The nature of the relationship between children's caregivers and incarcerated parents can be a powerful influence on how often children have contact with their imprisoned parents.

Researchers have reported that when this relationship is characterized by warmth, children tend to visit their incarcerated parents more often and speak with them on the telephone more regularly. And both incarcerated mothers and fathers are more likely to have contact with their children when they perceive co-parenting arrangements as being strong.

Caregiver Stress

Caregivers are usually the ones who make contact between children and incarcerated parents happen. They often arrange transportation to the jail or prison, pay for collect calls to inmates, and deal with children's behavior related to their contact with and separation from their inmate parents. Studies suggest this is not easy on them.

Most caregivers in one study expressed some level of concern that telephone contact between a child and

incarcerated parent would be detrimental to children. Some reported that they limited contact between the child and an incarcerated parent because of perceived behavioral changes among children after contact, such as confusion, frustration and upset.

In another study, children's visits with their incarcerated mothers were a source of stress for their caregivers, both before and after the visits.

Incarcerated Parents

Contact with their children can affect incarcerated parents in many ways. In some cases, visits have been associated with inmates experiencing emotional upheaval, anger and other feelings that can get them into trouble while in prison. One study of prison records reported that mothers who received visits from their children were more likely to have violent or serious disciplinary infractions, and women who didn't receive visits were more likely not to commit infractions or commit only minor infractions.⁵

On the other hand, other studies involving incarcerated mothers report that more visits with their children is

related to fewer symptoms of depression and that lower levels of contact with their children lead to higher levels of stress.

In general, the body of evidence suggests that enabling children to have contact with their incarcerated parents can yield benefits such as better parent-child relationships and a lower likelihood of children feeling alienated from the parent who is in jail or prison. Studies also suggest that such benefits depend on the quality of contact, interventions aimed at making contact easier on children, and other factors.

But interventions such as nurseries inside correctional facilities and programs that enhance the visiting experience of children are not staples in America's prison and jails. In fact, jails are more likely to restrict physical and face-to-face contact between parent and child. In doing so, the research suggests those correctional institutions are missing opportunities to help children, the inmates themselves and their families.



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This report is largely based on the following publications.

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Children, Youth & Families background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

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