



Assessing the Implications of Parental Incarceration on Families

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**Keynote Presentation**  
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## Guiding Principle # 2



This is Not One Monolithic Group  
Honor the Themes and the Variations




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### What We Bring to this Work Assumptions Beliefs and Attitudes

1. Children of incarcerated parents need \_\_\_\_\_
2. Incarcerated parents need \_\_\_\_\_
3. Incarcerated parents should \_\_\_\_\_
4. The best thing that could happen to the children of incarcerated parents is \_\_\_\_\_
5. The worst thing that could happen to children of incarcerated parents is \_\_\_\_\_

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### Children of the Incarcerated? Or Just Children?




Children of the Incarcerated like all humans are “all at once like all others, like some others and like no others.”

Adapted from  
Emmanuel Larthey

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## Guiding Principle # 1 Be Self Reflective

**What lenses are you wearing when you engage with children and families of the incarcerated?**



➤ **Which life experiences- revealed or unrevealed- color and shade your thoughts, feelings and opinions?**

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## Guiding Principle # 3 Be clear about who they are & why you need to know

- What data do you look for ?
  - Demographics: 1.7 or 2.7 million? Only 54%...
  - Impact Theories: Breaking the cycle vs promoting social and emotional well being
  - Program evaluation: Evidence based, evidence informed, promising practices
- *And why* do you need it?
  - To support the needs of the families?
  - To prove your worth?
  - To prove your point of view?
  - To rally support/\$?
  - To meet requirements: get the numbers?

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## What the children say...

“When people ask about my father, I think they will think things about me and him and my family. I know that if I tell them he is in prison for drugs, they will either drop me in the conversation because they are uncomfortable or give me this big lecture about how I don’t have to turn out like him. I hate it all, so I lie and say he died....”

P. age 13

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## Guiding Principle # 5

### Look Closely at the Research & always ask...why?

- Data set analyses
- Citing citations
- Lack of specificity
- Sub groups
- Lack of ability to draw conclusions on causality
- Meaning/interpretations

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## Guiding Principle # 4

### Asking to get vs. asking to give



***“Is Incarceration an issue for your family? We may have resources to help.”***

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## Connecting with Other Research

### Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children’s Learning and Development and change brain architecture.

*Scientists now know that chronic, unrelenting stress in early childhood, caused by abrupt separation from caregivers, extreme poverty, or parental depression, for example, can be toxic to the developing brain in the same way as witnessing violence changes brain architecture. Parents are most often the buffers from this stress.* Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2008

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## Lessons Learned from the Families

- “Care less about numbers and more about respecting our rights and privacy.”
- The importance of the “universal ask” for community agencies and services.
- Distribute a statement of rationale and information use in corrections
- Train interviewers
- Use interviewers from the “community”

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## What the children say...

“Why does incarceration negate the parent’s importance to the child in the eyes of the world? If parents are the buffers from toxic stress, shouldn’t people be doing everything they can to help keep those parent child bonds? Because the guilt I feel about needing my dad when everyone says I am better off without him, feels like a conflict of loyalty that is killing me inside..”

E. age 19

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**Also, Recognize the Stress on a Continuum of Criminal Justice System Involvement**

**Common Stress Points for Families**

- Arrest : Fear, Confusion, Panic
- Pre trial/ Trial : Anxiety, Frustration
- Sentencing: Hopelessness, Helplessness
- Initial Incarceration : Abandonment, Stigma, Loyalty Conflict, Worry
- Incarceration Stage 2: Resentment, Balance, Idealization
- Pre-release: Fear , Anxiety, Anticipation
- Post-Release: Ambivalence, Chaos

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**Reframing the Cycle**

Connecting with the literature on:

- Attachment
- Trauma
- Toxic Stress
- Resilience

But why aren't we?

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**Trauma & Toxic Stress:  
Impact on Brain Development**

- Impulse Control
- Cause and Effect Thinking
- Predictability
- Emotional Regulation
- Reciprocal Engagement



These effects can be lasting and lead to poor school performance, increased drop out rates, gang involvement, early pregnancies and drug use, abuse and addiction. As well as, difficulties attaching in potentially healing relationships. Could this be why????

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***There are no facts only interpretations***

Friedrich Nietzsche

“So when we talk about a child losing a parent to incarceration and we are interpreting the ACES literature only through a child maltreatment lens, the meaning that gets made ( intentionally or not) is that children of incarcerated parents are maltreated children , harmed by their parents and thus better off without them. If however, the parents who are in prison or jail are seen as potential supports for these children, as buffers from the toxicity of the stress, then a different meaning is made of the loss. It becomes more profound and less dismissible.”

Adalist-Estrin, A. White House Remarks 2014

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**Outcomes Research**

Murray’s Cambridge Study ( 2005) indicates that children separated from parents because of incarceration exhibited more antisocial behavior than children separated for other reasons. Murray, Farrington, Sekol and Olsen found that children of incarcerated parents were twice as likely to exhibit antisocial behaviors and other mental health problems as their peers. (2009)

**BUT why do you think this could be true?**

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**Guiding Principle # 6**



Create an atmosphere of safety and trust for children and families of the incarcerated in programs, practices and policies.

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## Creating Trust: Minimizing Stigma

- Challenge: As interest in this issue grows, how can we advocate for recognizing parental incarceration as a risk factor, use research to effectively garner support without creating automatic labels of pathology and further stigmatizing the children and their families?

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## Creating Trust

Challenge: How can we encourage families to recognize the impact of parental incarceration on child health and development and seek appropriate support and services without demoralizing them with images of neglect and projections of criminality?

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## What Causes the Shame and Stigma?

The meaning that is made....children are ashamed of their parents crime or imprisonment.

But the children say...

*"...they feel ashamed because of the reactions of...us. The body language and the words of teachers, coaches, social workers pastors and mentors, feels judgmental. When we train mentors and youth group leaders and camp counselors not to mention the parent unless the child brings it up, we must also train them to first let the child know that they know about the situation and are comfortable if the child ever wants to talk. Such training also needs to include practice in listening for how children "bring it up without bringing it up" as well as practice in how to respond effectively. The child who sees a red truck and says that's a cool truck, it's like the one my Dad had" is "bringing it up" and needs to know that it is ok with us to talk about Dad."*

Adalist-Estrin, A. White House Remarks 2014

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## ➤ Creating Trust :Words Matter

- If you say these are children who lack affection and guidance.... will caregivers bring their children?
- If you say you are saving these kids from prison...what are everyone's expectations?
- If you say they need services because the parent is incarcerated... what happens when they get out?
- If you say "their parents are criminals...but they want better for themselves..."you increase the anxiety of loyalty conflict."
- If you say they need positive role models, it increases shame and stigma

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## Impact of Shame and Stigma

"Relatives ...feel forced to hide from the shaming gaze of others...Leading them to withhold information and avoid connections that may help them."

Families Shamed by Rachel Condry 2007



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## Advocacy that Heals

***"Think of these children as you would your own, but never forget that they're not...if they were yours, you would not ...focus on the floor of crimelessness... as if it were the ceiling."***

Vince Schiraldi, DCDJ/ NYDPP

***"Since they are not, we need to be ever mindful that they have parents (in and out of jail ) that they love and are loved by."***

Ed, Maryland mentor

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**Guiding Principles # 7**  
**Advocate for Purposeful Programs and Relevant Supports**

“Joyce Arditti talks about parental incarceration as an ambiguous loss and the meaning that gets made of that is that the parent is gone, not dead and their role in the child’s life is unclear. But based on what the children have said, it may also be an ambiguous loss because the children’s feelings are unclear as are the reactions of others and the services available.”

Adalist-Estrin, A. White House Remarks 2014  
Arditti, J. (2012) *Parental Incarceration and the Family*  
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**Relevant Counseling: Minimizing Loyalty Conflicts**

Children find it very difficult to talk about the incarcerated parent to the caregiver or other adults and equally difficult to talk to the incarcerated parent about life at home. This increases stress and anxiety.  
( NRCCFI 2009)



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**Service Variations**


- Purposefully: Programs designed specifically for COIP
- Incidentally: Programs serving at risk children/youth that include COIP
- Universally: Programs serving all children with COIP unknown
- Peripherally: Programs serving IP orCaregivers with children benefitting
- Not Serving

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**Guiding Principle # 8**  
**Honor the Resilience of Children of the Incarcerated**

“ Risk factors are not predictive factors because of protective factors.”

David Satcher, M.D.  
Former U.S. Surgeon General




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**Relevant Support:**  
**Combatting the Conspiracy of Silence:**  
**Promoting Truth Telling**

- Children are not told the truth about their parent’s whereabouts
- Children are told the truth but told not to tell
- Children are told the truth, allowed to tell but discouraged from speaking their feelings


( NRCCFI 2009)



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**Protective Factors**

- Primary attachments
- Other adult bonds
- Skills-confidence
- Emotional competence
- Faith, hope, ability to find meaning



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## Supporting Caregivers as Protective Factors

### ➤ “The Collateral Consequences of Incarceration...the Effects on Caregivers of Children of Incarcerated Parents”

(Turanovic, Rodriguez and Pratt ( 2012)

- financial hardship
- shame and stigma
- elevated levels of emotional stress,
- additional strains placed on interpersonal relationships
- increased difficulty in monitoring and supervising children.
- This was true for all caregivers (mothers/grandparents,etc.)

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## Guiding Principle # 10

***Always Include*** children of the incarcerated, their caregivers, incarcerated parents and formerly incarcerated parents in defining the problems and designing the solutions. They should have a place at every meeting or table where their needs and concerns are discussed and planned for. They are the experts!

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## Supporting Incarcerated and Returning Parents as Protective Factors

- **Minimizing or repairing attachment disruptions and trauma damage**
- **Talking face to face: creating a pattern of communication**
- **Correcting frightening and idealized images**
- **Learning you are not alone**
- **Preventing termination of parental rights**
- **Preparing for release**



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## Guiding principle # 11

### Provide Specific Training and Reflective Supervision that Includes:

- The importance of self reflection and assumptions and perspectives on work with children of incarcerated parents.
- Exploration of the impact of parental justice system involvement on children and youth across a continuum of needs and circumstances.
- The importance of attachment to and the impact of trauma and toxic stress on brain development, behavior and child outcomes.
- Understand protective factors that lead children towards a brighter future, and how parents , caregivers and service providers can contribute towards these.
- Application of promising practices that reduce stigma, combat loyalty conflicts and provide relevant support to a variety of service delivery programs and practices.

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## Guiding Principle # 9 Challenge the Use of Inaccurate Data

**Encourage** the use of accurate and helpful statistics in portraying the needs of children and families of the incarcerated.

**See Jim Conway's article from Central Connecticut State University-**

*Seven out of ten? Not even close. A Review of Research on the Likelihood of Children with Incarcerated Parents Becoming Justice-Involved.*

[http://www.ctcip.org/app/download/8947957/CIP\\_Seven\\_Out\\_of\\_Ten\\_Not\\_Even\\_Close.pdf](http://www.ctcip.org/app/download/8947957/CIP_Seven_Out_of_Ten_Not_Even_Close.pdf)

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## Guiding principle # 12

Collaborate!

“Cross the river in a crowd and the crocodiles won’t eat you” African Proverb



Challenge: Now that children of the incarcerated are being focused on in many and varied settings how can we work together to combat conflicting agendas and other obstacles that interfere with effective program and policy development?

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## NRCCFI at Rutgers Camden



- Disseminating accurate data
- Training, inspiring, preparing and connecting those working in and around the field
- Guiding family strengthening policy and practice
- Including the families in defining the problem and designing solutions

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