Different Ages/Different Issues

By Ann Adalist-Estrin

Having a parent in prison or jail poses different challenges for the child at each stage of development.

Infancy: the first year of life

It may seem that a baby less than one year old would not react to the incarceration of a parent, but this is an important stage of development. Infants are learning to connect or attach to their caregivers. They are learning to trust that adults are there to meet their needs.

In this attachment stage, infants may sense the absence of the incarcerated parent. They may even miss a parent that was inconsistently available to the child prior to incarceration. If a primary caregiver parent “disappears” to go to prison, it will seriously interfere with the development of trust. Attachments can develop between infants and their new caregivers. But the trust and basic attachment tasks of this stage are threatened by multiple placement, and by any further disruptions in care giving relationships.

Toddlers: 1 and 2 year olds

Toddlers want to see if their attachments to the important adults in their world will hold up to their new needs. They need to run away and they need to say “NO.” Practicing these new verbal and motor skills will make the adults react in ways that feel controlling to the toddler. Toddlers want to be independent, not controlled—but they also want to feel safe. The tug between the desire for independence and the need to be attached and dependent makes this a particularly difficult age for children who are separated from a parent.

The toddler expresses these feelings and conflicts through behaviors that are annoying at best and rage provoking at worst. The tantrums and negativity that characterize this stage of development can really challenge any caregiver.

Caregivers of children of prisoners pour emotional and physical
resources into managing life in the
criminal justice system and have
little left for coping with a
toddler’s extreme upsets.

**Pre-schoolers: 3-5 years**

This is often called the age of
opposition, power and control
battles and magical thinking. At
this stage of development,
children need to prove to
themselves that they are separate
and unique, that they are
themselves and not their
caregivers.

“If I cooperate with you, I become
you. And since I am me, not you, I
will not cooperate and if you make
me, I will hate you and wish you
away.” This is not really a thought
but more a gut instinct in most 4
to 6 year-olds.

The new demands made by the
adult world for self-control may
lead children at this age to apply
magical thinking and fantasy to
the circumstances of their parent’s
incarceration. Pre-schoolers
believe they are responsible in
ways that are both illogical and
unreasonable. They may believe
that they wished the parent away
when they were mad at them.

They may regress in behavior,
experiencing bed-wetting,
sleeplessness, and eating
disruptions. They may also
develop fears, nightmares, and a
return to the aggressive tantrums
of toddlerhood.

Pre-school children need to know
that they have some influence on
adults to get their needs met.
Maintaining a connection to the
incarcerated parent may be most
critical at this stage of
development to avoid feelings of
guilt, loss of control,
powerlessness, and loyalty
conflicts that could have lasting
consequences.

**Early School-age: 5-8 years**

The grade school child is
beginning to replace parents as
the center of their universe.
These children will experience
sadness at the separation, but
have moved out into the world,
are learning new skills, and are
focused on their peer group. At
this stage of development,
children do understand the
concept of “crime and
punishment.” As one first grader
put it, “My Mommy is doing a
really long time out.” As they
begin to focus on affiliating with
other children, however, they
become aware of the stigma of
parental incarceration.

Early school-age children need
to experience success and
develop a sense of competence,
with their adults and with peers.
This makes them vulnerable to
taunts from schoolmates about
parent’s arrest or incarceration.
They are not yet able to
articulate the story or the feelings
well enough to both satisfy peers
and avoid upsetting or
embarrassing the family.

This conflict between affiliation
and family loyalty can lead
children to avoid school, develop
physical ailments, and
sometimes stop talking unless
they are at home.

**Pre-adolescence: 9-11 years**

Pre-adolescence is the stage of
social emotions. Children
struggle to understand the fact
that “right and wrong” can vary
from family to family. They are
striving to learn about their own
feelings about peers and family
members and to understand the
meaning behind the behaviors of
others. Adults need to provide
labels for children’s feelings
without judging them.

Adults also need to provide
children with good role models
and teach children
communication skills by saying
what they mean and listening
with compassion. Pre-
adolescents are also making
more choices on their own about
homework, activities, and
friends.

They need to be respected for
their opinions and tastes. They
may choose to distance
themselves from the relationship
with an incarcerated parent,
partly to exercise their choice but
also to avoid embarrassment.
Finally, as children strive to understand rules and consequences and to have empathy for others, adults in their world must be honest and genuine. Adults who act scared or angry but say “I am fine” will seriously confuse the developmental process of pre-adolescents. Such mixed messages may lead to acting out in an effort to understand what is really going on.

**Adolescence**

Teens are out in the world, trying to figure out who they are, where they are going, and who they want to go with them. They are also balancing taking risks and avoiding danger.

Many adolescents with incarcerated parents have experienced multiple separations from the incarcerated parent due to previous imprisonments or a chaotic lifestyle. Their experience has often included addictions, financial instability, caregiver stress, failing schools, and communities lacking in resources.

Adolescents are often expected to assume adult roles. They may be left for long periods without supervision. They can suffer from ambivalence about their incarcerated parent. They can, all at once, fear that they will turn out like their incarcerated parent, attempt to be like them, and fiercely reject them. They also have diminishing hope that their parents will return to them.

Keep in mind that children will react in many different ways to their parents’ imprisonment. These reactions depend on their age, personality, family circumstances, environmental stress, details of the crime and incarceration and available supports.

**About the Children of Prisoners Library (CPL)**

Pamphlets may be downloaded without charge from the Family and Corrections Network (FCN) web site, www.fcnetwork.org. Duplication is permitted and encouraged, so long as the materials are not altered or sold.

Sorry, FCN is not budgeted to mail free copies.

Send comments to The Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, 434/589-3036, 434/589-6520 Fax, fcn@fcnetwork.org. Copyright Family and Corrections Network, 2003.

**In Appreciation**

The Children of Prisoners Library is supported by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with additional support from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Jack DeLoss Taylor Charitable Trust and the Heidtke Foundation.

We are also grateful to our sponsoring organizations: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Southern Region, Children and Family Networks, Hour Children, The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and The Osborne Association.

Special thanks to the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York for permission to revise and publish material from the three volume set of pamphlets, *How Can I Help?*

The Children of Prisoners Library was written by Ann Adalist-Estrin, who adapted material from *How Can I Help* and authored other materials in the Children of Prisoners Library. It was edited and published by Jim Mustin.