

“I wasn't going to let them suffer for my mistake.”

Incarcerated Parents' Relationships with their Children Before,  
During, and After Incarceration

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Photo credit: <http://midvalleymentors.org/now-recruiting-children-of-prisoners/>

# The Problem

- Children of incarcerated parents are at a much greater risk for
  - Mental health problems
  - Antisocial and criminal behavior
  - Future unemployment and incarceration
- Unlike offenders and victims, these individuals are often overlooked in the system.
- Maintaining family connections may have benefits for children and inmates.

## Some Numbers

- In 2007, over 1.7 million children had a parent in prison.
- Between 1991 and 2008
  - Number of children with an incarcerated mother increased 131 percent.
  - Number of children with an incarcerated father increased 77 percent.
- More than 70 percent of those impacted are children of color.

## Research Questions

- What can we learn from parents who are currently incarcerated about helping children, inmates, and families?
- How do parents incarcerated within a low-security pre-release setting maintain contact with their children?
- What do residents of Montgomery County's Pre-Release and Reentry Services facility need to become better parents both before and after they are released?

# Research Methods

- Interviews

- 7 residents
- 1 case manager
- 2 community activists

- Observation

- Sponsor meeting
- Visiting hours

## Findings: Sample Characteristics

- Five men, two women
- Five Black, two white
- Five residents had been living with their children at time of arrest
- Four residents planned to back to living with their children upon release
- Five residents had children under 4 years old; four had children under 15 months old
- Four residents were still with the child's other parent, three were married

# Resident Suggestions and Ideas: Parenting Classes

- Four out of seven suggested
- Two more would be willing to take them
- Mandatory?
- Subjects
  - Effective communication
  - Positive parenting
  - Patience, anger management
  - Interacting with babies
  - Communication with spouse

## Resident Suggestions and Ideas: Visitation

- Separate room for parents with kids
- Toys and interactive or educational games
- Parent-child activities on the weekends
- Sponsor meeting
  - Art projects
  - Learn a skill



## Resident Suggestions and Ideas: Interventions to Help At-Risk Children

- Conflict resolution training
- Programs focusing on literacy, spirituality
- Recreational group for children with incarcerated parents
- Mentoring
  - Background checks/training
  - General support/someone to answer questions
  - Sports
  - Role model
- Journaling/letter writing/crafting

## Other Ideas

- Guest speakers (lecture on parenting)
- Job training
- Assistance securing housing

## Recommendations: Case Managers

1. Talk to incoming residents about their children.
2. Publicize available parenting classes.
  - *“I just give him what he wants. I think I do that, too, because part of me feels bad. . . . part of it is that I’m trying to make up for it.”*
  - *“It helps to listen to someone else's experiences. Everybody tends to go through the same things.”*

## Recommendations: Visitation

### 3. Hold a monthly activity for children/families

- *“It would help with the transition and keeping family ties.”*

### 4. Family visiting room?

- *“I don’t know if this is the environment you want your kids in—people be cussing . . . . It would be nice to have a space for only parents and kids to go to and spend time instead of having everybody all around—it’s too much.”*

## Recommendations: Other

5. Offer a way for families to network with each other
  - Informal
  - *“Make connections between wives so they can have someone to talk to when things are hard.”*
  - *“Have groups with other kids whose parents are incarcerated so that individual knows they are not alone.”*

- *“It just feels so good when you can hold them!” (BM, mid 20s)*
- *“When I saw them after four months my four-year-old thought it was his fault. He was apologizing to me.” (BF, late 20s)*
- *“Relationships are hard from a place like this.” (BM, early 30s)*
- *“I’m not going to force them to see me. It’s not like I really want them to come see me here.” (BM, mid 40s)*
- *“I just tell them it’s going to get better, we’re going to be back together again.” (BF, late 20s)*
- *“My mom tells him I’m in school, but now he’s terrified of going to school because he thinks he won’t come back.” (WF, early 20s)*

# Moving Forward

- Few studies on “what works” in helping children of incarcerated parents.
- For now, take what we do know about maintaining family ties.
- Questions?