



Three Stages of Reactivity for Children of Incarcerated Parents –Understanding the Reactions of Children to the Loss of a Parent to Incarceration: Patterns Observed

By Dee Ann Newell, Director, Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind, deeann@arkansasvoices.org

Based on my 20+ years experience working with children of incarcerated, I have observed some patterns of behavior reflected in three stages of reactivity for these children when their parents are incarcerated for service providers and relative caregivers to consider.

- **In the initial stage of separation**, they are usually quite anxious and unsettled with a chaos of feelings, including blaming themselves, the police officer(s) that arrested their parent, anger and rage, deep sadness and withdrawal, and helplessness. During this stage, the caring adult should engage in trust-building activities, laying down the trust components, e.g., confidentiality, non-judgmental about lots of things, not just the parent and the crime, respectfulness of the parent is imperative, and along with that is building demonstrable respect for the child. They have entered another universe, so to speak, where their secret-keeping may be a family rule, stigma begins to reign, and most of all the trauma-reactivity is at its height. The antidote to helplessness is to give them something that they can master and control, even if it is choosing among select mentor-mentee activities. This first stage is the time to begin talking about all of the “feeling” words, having the child identify as many feelings as human beings can have. For example, help them make a list, have child demonstrate, draw, or just talk about what those feelings are like. Begin your trust and respect activities, such as keeping every commitment you make, but never make promises that you are uncertain you can keep. Avoid this temptation because, while it might make in the short-term to help the child feel better, if these promises are unfulfilled, the child spins through another cycle of broken promises. Dashed hope may be a repetition of the familiar for many of these children, especially if the lost parent has abused drugs and often come in and out of the household or jail. Due to the initial trauma of separation, you will likely see the child's bewilderment and you need to acknowledge what you see, e.g., “I think I see a lot of confusion on your part right now? Would you like to draw, or sing or talk about it with me? I am a very good listener and we have been talking about our confidentiality agreement and my being very non-judging of anything you are feeling. Feelings are like visitors to your house. They don't move in if you greet them, know they are there, but sometimes if you do not greet them, they set up housekeeping and are hard to budge from the house.”
- **The second stage**, given that the trust is strengthening and you are enjoying activities together, some of the feelings will seem more differentiated to you, not so much chaos. The child may seem angry or especially sad, and you can ask the child's permission to hear what you think you are observing and, if yes, simply share your observations and ask them to verify if this is close to what they are feeling.
- **The third stage** is when the child does open up and begin to express some of the feelings. Here you may discover some of the inaccuracies in their information that leads to their feelings, and ask, always ask if you have permission to give them some feedback. If the child does not give you permission, do not pursue it but note the lack of information and think of ways to later come back to it. If it is okay with the caregiver or the courts, write letters to the parent, one from the child and one from you. Parents of children who are being mentored need information about the relationship so they do not feel threatened, for if threatened they may work against you out of fear that they are “losing their child to a stranger, someone who can spend time

with the child in ways the parent no longer can." If your program and the caregiver are in agreement, you can occasionally take the child to visit. If opposed, then stick with the mentor-mentee letter- writing. Help send schoolwork to the parent. And begin to talk to your mentee about other children and what you personally know or have read about their experiences with a parent in prison. The most common feeling, aside from sadness and grief over the loss of the parent, is the feeling that they are 'all alone." Hearing that there are other children just like them and hearing their stories often help to stop the internalizing. Lots of information can be passed on, as well--those questions that you heard earlier, can be answered by hearing other children responses.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: There are great books for children that can be read to them. "Visiting Day" by Jacqueline Woodson is one with beautiful illustrations, meant for a younger child, up to age 8 and 9, but a 3 year old can also understand.

<http://www.amazon.com/Visiting-Day-Jacqueline-Woodson/dp/0590400053>.

The Family and Corrections website has suggested books for children, based on their age. www.fcnetwork.org. For older youth, I have them read the Bill of Rights for Children of the Incarcerated, developed by San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (www.sfcipp.org), as well as sections from the book, "All Alone in the World" by Nell Bernstein (<http://www.amazon.com/All-Along-World-Children-Incarcerated/dp/1565849523>)

The newest publication, What Will Happen to Me? by Howard Zehr and Lorraine Stutzman Amustz (2011 Good Books, PA), has been wonderfully received by the children and families, with portraits and texts by the children, followed by Restorative Justice practices offered to support the caregivers of the children.