

Preparing yourself to offer support

1. Recognize your own attitudes and perspective regarding incarceration.

Assess your values, personal experiences and beliefs about incarcerated people and their families. News media and television shows provide sensational and not necessarily accurate portrayals of people who have committed crimes, the prisons where they are held, and the families they leave behind—all of which can shape your attitudes and affect how you respond.

2. Find a way to identify children in your class who have a mom or dad in prison.

Consider including “parental incarceration” on enrollment forms so that you know if a child has an incarcerated parent. Disclosure is optional of course, but it can help determine which children are affected, and prepare you to better meet their needs. A form in which a caregiver can “check the box” to indicate the child is affected by parental incarceration sends an important message to families: this is a more common experience than they might have realized. A second box could ask whether they would like information about services and support that might be available.

3. Ask for information about the child's situation.

If possible, talk with the child's primary caregiver. Get a sense of the caregiver's relationship with the incarcerated parent, whether the child may experience conflicted loyalties, and whether contact will be allowed or supported. Find out what the child has been told about the absent parent, what he or she knows about the incarceration, and who the child's current supportive adults are. Getting accurate information will help you to assist the child in making sense of what has happened and to provide support as necessary. Talk with the caregiver about their wishes regarding confidentiality, and how to handle disclosure; let them know how you will deal with it in the classroom. Offer information and guidance if they are open to it.

4. Make time for one-on-one attention.

Problematic behaviors in the classroom signal a need for special care, and often coincide with a disturbing event at home (e.g. parent is moved to a different facility, family missed a visit, change in release date). When families are dealing with a lot, regular one-on-one attention at home becomes rare and children can feel lost. It's especially helpful if you can find moments to connect individually with the child.

Anticipate difficulties around holidays; try to prepare in advance for special events, and create realistic expectations for celebrations. If you see a change in behavior around birthdays, Father's Day or Mother's Day, tell the child what you notice, and ask about it.

There may be times that the child of an incarcerated parent may not want too much group interaction. You can support and encourage children in learning many positive ways to soothe and comfort themselves — solitary play, looking at books, drawing and painting, listening to music, big-belly breathing, going out for a walk, watering a plant.

Creating a supportive environment

1. Establish familiar routines.

Stability and consistency help a child to feel safe. Simple daily routines provide a source of comfort and reassurance—something needed more than ever when a parent has gone away. In a child’s world, repetitive activities, however brief and unimportant they might seem to adults, can become meaningful rituals. Maybe the child wants to drink out of the same cup at every meal, or seems insistent on sitting in only one place to put on her shoes. Familiar routines and rituals help children to feel secure even in the midst of chaos. You can use a chart with pictures, or a simple calendar, to help the child understand their schedule, what is going to happen, with whom, and when.

2. Be conscious of your language.

Try to stay away from using terms like inmate, convict, prisoner, as it may alienate the child and their parent. Use language that respects the individual as a human being before you define him or her by the offense. For example, a person charged with a crime, a mom who is in prison, a dad who is formerly incarcerated.

Be careful when making generalizations about moms and dads, or families. Children who have experienced trauma are living in a minefield. Questions that are simple and straightforward for many kids can be loaded and painful for a child who has lost a parent to prison (e.g. “what did you do this weekend?”) Building a “right to pass” into any open discussion can help children feel more comfortable.

3. Provide useful books.

Use books to help normalize the experience for all children. When there are books about incarceration right in the classroom, it helps everybody. If parents break a law, they might have to go to prison for a while. That’s one of the hard and scary things that sometimes happens in families. What are some of the other hard and scary things that can sometimes happen—are there books showing those things too? Books in the classroom can be a non-threatening way to let children know they are not alone when the hard stuff happens.

4. Be a good role model.

Help the child to learn—and practice—what to say when others ask about his parent, or make derogatory remarks. You can model an appropriate response whenever questions or comments arise in your presence. Even if you lack sufficient understanding of the family’s situation, you can rely on your teaching instincts and respectful attitude to model an instructive response. When a child sees how you handle the situation, he—and other children in the group—will feel more comfortable and confident in handling it.