

The Power of Connection: Helping Families Thrive After Incarceration

Across the United States on any given day, almost three million children have a parent serving time in a jail or prison (Ghandnoosh et al., 2021). The impact of incarceration on families touches the parent, the child(ren), other caregivers, and the community. Having a parent in prison is one of the ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), with the potential to contribute to a greater risk of physical and mental health problems in adulthood (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026). In order to mitigate this risk factor, it is essential to explore the developing body of evidence-based and promising programs and practices to help parents and their children stay connected and thrive during incarceration and reentry.

Breaking Down Systemic Barriers

Opportunities for meaningful connection are essential to keep and continue ongoing development of the parent-child relationship. Yet the current carceral system often has institutional policies and practices that impede that connection, particularly having an impact on families in poverty.

A number of policy recommendations emerged from the portion of BJA's Second Chance Act initiative focused on Addressing the Needs of Incarcerated Parents and Their Minor Children (Pfeiffer, 2024). Recommendations for policy and practice changes include:

1. Eliminate costs for contact: The majority of jails and prisons require payment for phone calls, often making calls between parents and their children inaccessible or inconsistent. Some facilities have implemented video visitation, but this is also at a cost borne by the family.
2. Child-friendly contact visitation: Access to visitation rooms where children and parents can talk and interact through play helps to grow the attachment necessary for long-term bonding.
3. Transportation: Many parents are incarcerated hours from their families. The cost of transportation to visit on a regular basis can place a significant burden on families trying to meet basic needs. Placing individuals in facilities closer to their home communities and developing no-cost transportation programs would assist families in visiting their loved ones on a regular basis.

By reducing barriers on the inside to help build child-parent connection, incarcerated individuals will be able to reenter their communities with stronger family bonds to help support their transition. Upon reentry, community corrections systems can assist with reducing systemic barriers by evaluating travel policies that are prohibitive for reconnecting with children and families (Budd & Pearce, 2026).



Healing Relationships

The circumstances around an individual's incarceration can often strain or break relationships with family members and children. The barriers to connection while incarcerated can further exacerbate this loss of connection and support. When an individual begins planning for reentry, the support of family can be a significant factor in the success of reentry. Creating opportunities for families to discuss what happened, how it affected them, and what is needed to heal can be done through restorative practices such as family circles or family group conferences. These processes are grounded in Indigenous healing practices and are used all over the world. They can be beneficial to discussing and clarifying parenting roles and responsibilities for the reentering individual if they will not be living with their minor children. It is important to ensure that these processes are voluntary and do not violate any court orders or safety measures if family members were victims in the situation.

Peer Support/Navigator Programs

Many reentry services and programs have a peer support component, meaning they are facilitated by someone with lived experience. That experience could be with addiction, recovery and/or incarceration. Having someone who has walked the same journey can be a powerful support system for individuals reentering the community (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2020). These peer support individuals can provide resources, mentoring, and crisis support. For parenting individuals, they can help facilitate peer parenting education groups, family activities, and support groups for children of incarcerated parents. Some programs call these individuals "navigators" as they can help the reentering individual navigate all the systems needed to get signed up for benefits, enrolled in school/employment programs, assisting with technology, etc.

Gender Specific Considerations

While men make up the majority of the incarcerated and reentering population, women make up approximately 18% of this population, and of those women an estimated 58% are mothers. More work is being done across the country to support incarcerated mothers during their reentry journey. Examples include prison nursery programs that allow mothers to bond with their infants for up to two years, increased visitation, and other supports that help maintain the mother/child attachment. However, more work needs to be done to tailor reentry programs to meet the unique needs of women and mothers. Research has shown that the strategies previously discussed such as programming, restorative practices, peer support, etc. are essential for women, but ensuring that groups/peer support are gender-responsive can have better outcomes (National Institute of Justice, 2024).

Resource Highlight

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) published an article in April 2024, “Five Things to Know About Women and Reentry.” The NIJ highlights the unique challenges and opportunities in helping women during their incarceration and transition back to the community, while pointing out that programming has historically been generalized to men.

Conclusion

Growing evidence is clear that incarceration not only impacts the incarcerated individual but also elevates their children’s risk of future system involvement. By reducing unnecessary system barriers and increasing opportunities for connection and relationship we can maintain and grow family attachments that are critical for all members of the family. Seamless transitions from prison to community-based reentry programs that develop parenting skills, advance education and employment opportunities, and peer support help individuals stay in the community to support their children and families. These outcomes can benefit both families and the communities in which they live.



Works Cited

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