

Tip Sheets

Educator Strategies: Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

Educators play a vital role in providing stability, emotional support, and academic guidance to children affected by parental incarceration.

Schools must serve as safe spaces where children can focus on learning and social growth, despite family challenges.

Caregivers and educators can foster a stable, supportive, and emotionally nurturing environment that is essential for children. Central to this effort is adopting trauma-informed classroom practices to support children experiencing parental incarceration.

How Caregiving Shapes Development

Three Essential Factors

- Developmental research highlights three key factors—predictability, controllability, and social support—as essential for healthy emotional and cognitive growth in children, particularly those navigating parental incarceration. These elements promote stability, resilience, and a sense of security, enabling children to cope with uncertainty and stress more effectively.

Predictable routines create stability

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network advises creating a structured, reliable environment that minimizes anxiety and emotional distress, providing children with a sense of normalcy during difficult transitions.

- This can be achieved by maintaining consistent daily routines, such as regular mealtimes, bedtime rituals, and familiar activities, along with visual schedules or routine charts that help children understand what to expect each day.

Empower children through choice

- Allowing children small opportunities for decision-making fosters emotional resilience and helps them regain control over their lives.
- Encouraging children to set personal goals, such as choosing an activity they enjoy or deciding how to communicate with their incarcerated parent, strengthens their sense of agency.
- A child dealing with the loss of a parent's presence may feel powerless. Provide them with choices such as selecting a game, a book, or a way to express their feelings. These small choices can help them feel valued and independent.

Social support via strong relationships

- The Urban Institute states that strong relationships with caregivers, teachers, and peers act as protective factors, reducing the negative impacts of early adversity.
- The Annie E Casey Foundation explains that children of incarcerated parents often feel isolated or misunderstood. Connecting them to peer support groups, mentorship programs, and structured social activities can help build relationships and foster emotional well-being.
- Encourage children to participate in playgroups, after-school programs, or local youth mentorship initiatives to establish a

strong support network beyond their immediate family.

The Role of Early Childhood Educators in Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents

Schools as safe spaces:

- Schools can provide structured environments that promote learning and social development.
- Supportive educators play a crucial role in helping children develop confidence and resilience despite facing family challenges.

Trauma-informed educators:

- Teachers trained in trauma-informed care can identify signs of distress and offer emotional support.
- Safe & Just Michigan recommends strategies such as mindfulness exercises, positive reinforcement, and social-emotional learning to help children manage stress effectively.

Key strategies for post-incarceration & family reunification:

- Rebuilding family relationships after incarceration requires patience, open communication, and structured support.
- Prepare for reunification by discussing with the child the expectations and emotions that may arise when a parent returns home.
- Maintain stable classroom routines to help children feel secure during the transition.
- Promote open conversations that allow children to express their concerns.

Trauma-Informed Strategies for Early Educators

Emotion Coaching:

- Help children identify and express feelings through storytelling, role-playing, and guided conversations.

- Encourage self-reflection and emotional regulation through structured activities.

Safe spaces in the classroom:

- Create cozy reading corners, sensory-friendly zones, and mindfulness areas.
- Provide quiet spaces for children to process emotions with support.

Gentle transitions:

- Use songs, visuals, and verbal cues to ease transitions between activities.

Parent-child connection support:

- Encourage letter-writing, drawing, and creating memory books to help maintain bonds with incarcerated parents.
- Facilitate supervised virtual interactions with their incarcerated parents whenever possible to reinforce continuity.

Additional Resources

Sesame Street Workshop

https://interactive.sesameworkshop.org/SSICStory010_InMyFamily/index.html

Nine PBS, 'The Effects of Parental Incarceration on Children'

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCW5ffV_tUI&t=8s

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Funding provided by [Greater Twin Cities United Way 80x3 - Resilient from the Start](http://GreaterTwinCitiesUnitedWay.org).

