

Tip Sheets

The Impact of Parental Incarceration on Young Children

Parental incarceration is recognized as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), a childhood stressor that can have long-term emotional, psychological, and physical consequences.

Children exposed to parental incarceration at a young age are significantly more likely to experience disrupted family dynamics, behavioral challenges, and depressive symptoms. Children are hidden victims of the criminal justice system due to the lack of systemic support they receive from the psychological strain, school difficulties, and economic hardship they may experience due to parental incarceration.

Key Findings from Minnesota ACEs Research

Prevalence

- The Minnesota Department of Health reports that nearly 29% of Minnesota youth have experienced living with an incarcerated parent or guardian.
- The 2022 Minnesota Student Survey found that children who experience one ACE, such as parental incarceration, are more likely to encounter additional adversities, including household substance misuse or domestic violence.

Mental health risks

- Children with four or more ACEs are 10 times more likely to report suicidal thoughts and 15 times more likely to experience anxiety.

Behavioral impact:

- Youth exposed to ACEs are significantly more likely to engage in substance use, including e-cigarettes, marijuana, and prescription drug misuse.

Impact on Children:

Attachment difficulties:

- Young children may fear abandonment or develop intense separation anxiety.

Disruptions in routine:

- When a parent is incarcerated, caregiving often shifts to grandparents, relatives, or foster systems, causing disruptions in routine, emotional strain, and role adjustments.

Confusion and distress:

- Children may struggle to understand why their parent is absent, which can lead to emotional insecurity.
- For example, a toddler who once relied on bedtime routines with a now-absent parent may have difficulty sleeping and experience increased anxiety.

Disrupted family dynamics:

- The National Institute of Justice reports that the absence of a parent can lead to instability in caregiving roles, resulting in increased emotional strain within the household.

Behavioral challenges:

- Children exposed to paternal incarceration at a young age are significantly more likely to develop rule-breaking tendencies and struggle with authority.
- The sudden loss of parental presence can lead to confusion, anxiety, and depression, affecting trust, behavior, and developmental milestones.

Depressive symptoms:

- Early exposure is linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, which may persist into adulthood.
- A child who internalizes stigma may withdraw from friendships and school activities, leading to long-term emotional distress.

Long-term consequences:

- Children of incarcerated parents face lower academic achievement, higher unemployment rates, and increased likelihood of justice system involvement.

Recognizing Signs of Trauma in Children

Regression:

- Early exposure to childhood trauma is linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety, which may persist into adulthood.

Emotional outbursts:

- Another indicator of trauma is increased irritability and mood swings triggered by discussions about their parent.

Nightmares and sleep disturbances:

- The National Institute of Justice shares that another indicator of trauma is increased irritability and mood swings triggered by discussions about a child's incarcerated parent.

Changes in appetite:

- Trauma may be indicated by changes in eating habits, including loss of appetite or overeating as a coping strategy, especially when related to food insecurity.

Support Strategies for Family Relationships

Encourage open conversations:

- Talking openly about the incarcerated parent reduces stigma and confusion.
- Encourage visits, letters, and virtual communication with the incarcerated parent.

Offer interventions and support:

- Trauma-informed care can help mitigate emotional distress through safe environments, consistent routines, and emotional validation. These all improve a child's ability to cope with trauma.
- Foster consistency in routines; this creates stability for children.

Additional Resources

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris and ACEs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hh1idR1XkC4>

Minnesota Association for Mental Health

<https://macmh.org/infant-and-early-childhood/resources-for-healing-centered-practice/>

Content contributed by: Kamyala Howard, MSW, LICSW

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