



Tips for Tots



Tip #1: Supporting Children with Incarcerated Parents

Strategies

Did you know?

Infant/Toddler:

The loss of a parent to incarceration can profoundly impact the young child who is just developing their sense of trust and security in their world. The child's ability to cope with this loss depends largely upon the reactions of the caregivers around them and the consistency in their routines and care giving environments. The child's reactions vary depending on their age, which parent is involved and the stability of their environment. Infants and Toddlers are likely to feel scared, abandoned and confused and exhibit behaviors such as withdrawal, crying, clinginess and changes in sleep or eating habits.

Preschool:

Children typically have emotional connections with their parent regardless of the circumstances surrounding the incarceration. Preschoolers who have an incarcerated parent may have very strong and sometimes mixed emotions ranging from anxiety, to anger to sadness to guilt. They may react in a variety of ways such as regression, withdrawal, aggression, stubbornness, or they may appear to have no reaction at all. It is important to talk with the child about the incarceration and answer any questions simply and truthfully.

Infant/Toddler:

- Follow a predictable daily routine, maintain close, soothing interactions during times like diapering, feeding and bathing.
- Provide pictures of the child's parent(s) or a soft item of the parent's ex. T-Shirt. Support ways for the child and parent to stay in touch ex. phone contact, notes, etc.
- Create consistent routines for visitation. Prepare the child ahead of time for the visit reminding them the day of the visit.
- The same caregiver should bring the child to the visit, play calming music in the car, and allow for slow transitions to and from the caregiver and parent.
- Bring soothing items to the visit ex. blanket, favorite toy.
- Help the incarcerated parent understand that the child may need time to warm up to them during the visit. Suggest activities for the parent and child to do, such as finger plays/songs. Provide parent with an update of the child's milestones. Involve the parent in developing support strategies for the child.

Preschool:

- Provide a consistent environment; include daily routines and calm loving guidance.
- As indicated provide the child with an object and picture of the parent. Ask the parent to write brief notes to reassure the child that can be read to the child often.
- Provide reassurance depending on the circumstances, such as mom/dad has a bed and food and is safe. Or if the child was harmed that the child is safe from the harm. Avoid talking badly about the parent. Emphasize the parent and other caregivers care about the child.
- Prepare the child for the parent visit telling older children in advance include the day and time (ex. Wed. at lunch time) and younger children the day of the visit. Let the child know what to expect. ex. Guards, searches, prison clothing, the visitation room.
- Create a visitation bag with items to help children before and after a visit. Maintain regular, soothing routines around a visit. Include transportation routines, as well.
- Understand how important it is for the child to visit and know it will be stressful. Involve the incarcerated parent in the development of the support plan for the child include, soothing strategies such as deep breathing. If the child is going to the visit from school, share this info. and strategies with the child's teacher.

Resources:

www.australianprisonfoundation.webs.com
 Effects of Separation & Loss on Children's Development
 Susan Hois 2008
www.asentenceoftheirown.com/Home.html

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