

# Getting the most out of parent-teacher conferences with incarcerated parents

BY SUSAN RADCLIFFE, MINDY BLACK-KELLY AND DANIEL POLLACK



**A**s of July 2021, there were 2.1 million people in U.S. prisons. According to a 2016 U.S. Department of Justice survey of inmates, 47% of state prisoners and 57% of federal prisoners reported having at least one minor child, with the average number being two children. The average age of those minor children in state prisons was 9 years old; in federal prisons it was 10 years old. With 2.7 million children in the United States impacted by incarceration, this yields an extraordinary number of school aged children who are lacking a parental figure as they navigate through the school system.

Parental incarceration is one of the “top 10” Adverse Childhood Experiences which, according to Kristin Turney (2019), “can produce isolation and shame that impedes social support systems, interactions with peers and teachers, and children’s educational opportunities and outcomes.” In looking at supporting children who have an incarcerated parent, is an obvious untapped resource being overlooked when it comes to school support?

It is well established that “[v]isitation with a noncustodial parent, even one who is incarcerated, is presumed to be in the best interests of the child” (Matter of Tamara T. v Brandon U., 180 AD3d 1286, 1286, 118 N.Y.S.3d 321 [2020]). Not surprisingly, parents have long been noted as a key figure in a child’s academic success. Active parental involvement can help improve a student’s attitude, morale, academic achievement and social adjustment. Additionally, parental involvement helps children grow to be responsible members of the community. Kristin Turney (2021) notes there is a positive relationship between poor mental health and having an incarcerated family member. Davis and Shlafer (2017) found “adolescents with incarcerated parents are at elevated risk for mental health problems ...” Research conducted by Rosa M. Cho (2011) revealed “adolescents are indeed at greater risk of school dropout during the year(s) their mothers are incarcerated.” A study of children of incarcerated mothers aged 13-20 years found “... adolescents were more than four times as likely to be out of school than a sample of their best friends; four times more likely to be suspended; three times more likely to be significantly absent from school and nearly four times as likely to be failing classes. More than half of these children required school visits for disciplinary reasons during the previous 12 months, and more than a quarter of them had been arrested.”

Children of incarcerated parents struggle. They don’t have the extra support at home because the caregiving parent is often trying to compensate financially for the loss of the incarcerated parent. Additionally, children often struggle with the stigma of incarceration and grieve in silence.

## Orchestrating a conference

Incarcerated parents have a lot of “time” on their hands to think about their lives and the impact their absence is having on their children. Like most parents, they also want their children to have better lives than what they have. Incarcerated parents want to be involved and are willing to participate in academic activities if given the opportunity and felt of value. Schools can help with this. Indeed, some states are implementing policy changes to make sure incarcerated parents are involved in their children’s education. Washington State legislators have implemented laws and policies to support children of incarcerated parents. An incarcerated parent in the State of Washington is offered two parent conferences a year with their child(ren)’s educators. Correctional facilities post flyers for parents to sign up, and facility staff coordinate the visits with the educational systems. Even in states where such laws do not yet exist, advocates can facilitate parent/teacher conferences from inside the facility. It just takes a bit of planning.

Here are a few tips for orchestrating a conference:

- Plan with the school system. Each school district has a counselor or social worker who can help inform you of the designated parent-teacher conference day, or a specific time to talk with the incarcerated parent. Starting with a phone call to the school and explaining you would like to organize a phone call between the teacher and parent is the best place to start.
- Ask the teacher to send the incarcerated parents any educational work, progress reports, and/or photos. Please note, most school staff may need education on the facility mail rules for those who are incarcerated.
- Ask teachers to explain the educational school programs. Most schools are using some form of online technology and the terms may be new to the parent.
- Encourage the teacher to start thinking about ways the parent could help support schoolwork from a phone call.

- Prepare the parent. These conferences may be new to some parents. Discussions about what will be discussed and suggestions of potential questions they can ask the teacher may help the conference go smoother.
- Afterwards, encourage the incarcerated parent to send a thank-you note to the teacher for their time. It never hurts to share some gratitude.

Barbara Ross, an elementary educator in Maryland with 34 years of experience, notes: “It was one of the best parent-teacher conferences I have ever had,” referring to her first conference with an incarcerated father. “He came to the conference with prepared questions about his son’s status in my class. He asked about his son’s strengths, areas needing improvement and if I had any ideas to help his son academically. He took notes and wanted to know how he could help support me and his son through the educational process. He was fully engaged in the conference.”

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## **Expectations for incarcerated parents**

Incarcerated parents can help support teachers by providing reminders of expected behaviors in class, reinforcing homework and study habit expectations, and having conversations with their child(ren) about the value of education. The particular father mentioned above,



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discovered that as a child, he read the same books as his son was reading now. A plan was devised to send those books to the father in prison so he and his son could read together during visits/calls.

Here are a few tips incarcerated parents can use during phone calls to supplement their child’s academics:

- Practice arithmetic problems.
- Read a book. Since books can be sent to most prisons via third party, the parent and child can have the same book. Parents can help their child with sounding out words.
- Take an interest in school academic programs by asking about tests, concepts and what skills their child is working on. Ask children “what was the most interesting thing you learned today?” or “what is one new fact that you learned this week?” Even better, ask children to teach something to the parent.
- Adapt learning games to the telephone, such as storytelling with vocabulary words or creating categories of words that follow the alphabet, i.e. “A is for Apple” “B is for Banana”. Race the clock to make it more fun,
- Discuss how to handle “sticky situations” with peers. Talk about being teased or left out and feelings associated with these situations. Talk about what happened, the child’s reaction, how others responded and what can be done differently in the future.

- Encourage support of the teacher and not discord with the educational system.
- Talk about how “knowledge is power.” Getting a high school diploma is important. Education is the key to getting out of poverty and succeeding in life.
- Discuss future goals and the possibilities of continuing formal education after high school.

Ann Adalist-Estrin, Director of the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) at Rutgers University-Camden, sums up the needs nicely. “Advocates and policymakers around the U.S. are aligning around goals to improve child wellbeing with incarcerated parents. They are honoring the significance of the incarcerated parent as a buffer from the trauma and stress caused by parental incarceration leading to policy recommendations that would offer incarcerated parents opportunities to take part in school and homework helping programs by phone or video conferencing.”

Educators and policy-makers concur that promoting the active involvement of parents in their child’s

education is essential. Toward that end, correctional officials should encourage parents to become involved in decision-making processes.



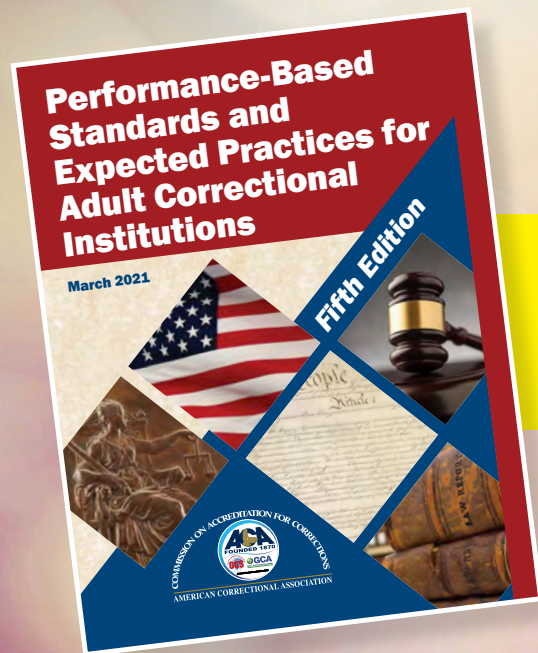
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