



## From the Editor

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# The Messages Project: Maintaining the Child/Parent Bond During Parental Incarceration

*My younger brother had been sentenced to jail and was unable to see his two children. It was heartbreaking. While I wasn't able to make the project benefit him directly (it hasn't yet come to our state's institutions), I found it therapeutic to work with a group of people who understood what my family had been going through. I found solace in knowing that books I collected were sent to children who really needed that contact with their parents. Those who've never experienced that kind of trauma are often quick to judge and don't understand or appreciate the hardships family members are susceptible to as a result of someone else's crimes.*

– Family member of former inmate, personal communication, May 10, 2012

Until a colleague brought The Messages Project to my attention, I had never given a thought to the invisible victims of our criminal justice system: the children of incarcerated parents. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, slightly more than 1.7 million children in the United States under age 18 have a parent in state or federal prison, representing 2.3% of the total U.S. population (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). The number of parents of minor children held in the nation's prisons increased by 79% between 1991 and 2007. Because police do not routinely ask at the time of arrest whether their prisoners have children, nor do sentencing judges or correctional agencies regularly raise this question, it is unclear exactly how many children are affected, who they are, or where they live.

### What We Know about Children Of Incarcerated Parents

Over half of children with incarcerated parents are under 10 years of age, with 8 years being the mean age (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001). The child's age and development level helps determine the impact of

parental incarceration (Uchida, Swatt, & Solomon, 2012). Although it may seem that infants would not react to a parent's incarceration, they may sense the absence of the parent, even if he or she was inconsistently available prior to incarceration. When the primary caregiver parent goes to prison, infants may have difficulty developing trust (DeLeon, 2009). For children 2 to 6 years of age, the disruption of incarceration is associated with poor peer relationships, diminished cognitive abilities, or emotional and psychological problems. School-age children may experience school-related problems, such as poor academic performance and aggression or other classroom behavior problems. They may be victims of teasing and ostracism. As children reach adolescence, suspension and dropout rates rise. Children of any age may have disturbances in their sleep patterns and experience feelings of grief, loss, confusion, and anger. Some children become withdrawn or secretive, display regressive or attention-seeking behavior, or have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as flashbacks about the crimes or arrests (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

We have known for some time that children who maintain contact with their parent during incarceration exhibit fewer behavioral problems (Sack, Seidler, & Thomas, 1976) and have overall improved outcomes (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004). However, because prisons are typically located in remote areas not served by transportation, one of the most significant difficulties is maintaining ties between prisoners and their families.

### Maintaining the Child/Parent Bond through The Messages Project

In 1994, Carolyn LeCroy witnessed firsthand the effects of broken relationships between incarcerated parents and their children. The news pro-

ducer was arrested for possession of marijuana with intent to distribute. Although the marijuana in her storage unit belonged to a former friend, she knew it was there, and when the drug dog hit on her unit, the former friend bolted and left her holding the bag. She was sentenced to 55 years in prison, although she was later paroled after serving about two years. She said that visits from her sons, ages 18 and 22, kept her going. She was one of the lucky ones; according to the U.S. Department of Justice, only 20% of prison inmates receive monthly visits from their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

Upon her release, Carolyn began using her background as a film and video producer to develop The Messages Project. A non-profit organization, The Messages Project works with other non-profits across the country to raise funds and collect children's books to take to prisons. A film crew and the books arrive at the prison. The crew films a message from the inmate to his or her children. Inmates select a book as a gift for their children, which some prisoners read as part of their message. Donations are used to cover the costs of filming. The DVD is sent home to the child along with the book the parent has chosen.

Non-profit organizations in the prison locales partner with Carolyn to implement the Project. Carolyn provides three days of training. The first day, she teaches participants filming techniques, with a special emphasis on sensitivity to the inmate. She provides strategies they can use to coach inmates on what to say and ways to say it, stressing the importance of awareness of body language. "The camera doesn't lie," said Carolyn. "Children can read the body language and know if the parent is sincere." The second day, she supervises hands-on experiences at a prison where trainees can try out their new skills. The third day, Carolyn stands back

and lets the crew film on their own with support and assistance from her if needed.

The Project has two restrictions regarding inmates who can participate: 1) no sex offenders, and 2) no inmate with restrictions from the court, social services, or the caregiver about contact with the child. Institutions have their own requirements. Inmates have to be 1) charge- or ticket-free (common terms for infractions) for 6 months, and 2) working their program. Some prisons include the Project as a celebratory component of their prison parenting program. "The parenting programs typically run for 12 weeks," explains Carolyn. "On the 13th week, they get to be part of The Messages Project." Thus, the Project provides a great incentive for getting and keeping inmates on the right track to improving their lives.

Carolyn has been honored as a CNN Hero (2008) and has received several other notable awards for developing this innovative way for incarcerated parents to connect with their children and to answer their often unspoken questions. Children

of prisoners imagine all kinds of explanations and answers to why their parent is in prison; they often feel vulnerable, unprotected, and at fault. They may blame themselves for the loss of a parent to jail or prison (for example, "If only I hadn't begged so much for those designer shoes"); as a result, they may rebel or withdraw. Parents use the DVDs as an opportunity to acknowledge responsibility for being in prison and to apologize to their children for putting them in the difficult situation.

The Messages Project is currently in prisons in four states: Virginia, Oklahoma, California, and Nebraska, where the Department of Corrections has mandated the Project for all Nebraska prisons. Carolyn hopes to soon expand the Project to Florida and other states. Prisons are asked to offer the Project three times a year: at Christmas, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Carolyn has also developed an interactive program to support parent/child bonds. The first book, which includes pages for children and their parents to complete and send to each other, will be released this fall.

### What Does The Messages Project Mean to Families?

Some families report that children play their parent's DVDs over and over again. A grandmother, who is the caregiver for her grandson, reported the need to lower the DVD player to enable her grandson to play the DVD himself. Relationships between parents and children have been maintained or re-established. After viewing her incarcerated mother's DVD message to her, a previously very angry daughter renewed contact with her mother after 13 years.

The Messages Project has also had a profound effect on people it has touched indirectly. Again, some words from my colleague whose brother was incarcerated:

*I'm happy to say that my brother has been home for almost two years now, and he is closer to his children than ever before. While they are still yet too young to understand the circumstances that kept them apart for so long, I hope that someday I'll be able*

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to tell them about my work with *The Messages Project* and encourage them to promote awareness for kids like themselves without shame. These children are victims. It still makes me sad that someone so close to me caused his own children such grief, but I have faith that they will be forgiving as the rest of us have. Prisoners need family support to help them overcome their demons; judgment won't solve their internal issues. I stood behind him as best I could during that time, writing letters and visiting as much as possible, while dedicating my spare time to this group. Even though my brother's time is complete, I've continued this work.

### Implications for Pediatric Nurses

Approximately 1 in 40 children in the United States has a parent in prison (Adalist-Estrin & Mustin, 2003). Research suggests that having a parent go to prison compromises child wellbeing and that these effects linger, leaving children of incarcerated parents at elevated risk of social exclusion and other negative consequences later in life (Foster & Hagan 2007).

Although each family's experience is unique, commonalities exist. Many families find that at a time when help

is most needed, people tend to pull back and withdraw from them. Families often have a sense of shame and fear of being labeled, and are sometimes viewed as guilty by association. Financial difficulties that were present before incarceration are now magnified.

As pediatric nurses, we are in contact with children every day. Are any of these children the silent and invisible victims of parental incarceration? Yes, probably so.

How do we know and how can we help? When children feel shame or fear about talking to anyone about their situation, it limits the ability of others to understand and help.

Becoming involved in *The Messages Project* (<http://themessagesproject.org/>) could be a starting point. Adalist-Estrin (2003) points out that many parents in prison can contribute positively to a child's upbringing: "Prisoners who have failed as citizens can succeed as parents" (p. 2). We can send a book or sponsor a book drive. We can identify non-profit organizations that might be interested in partnering with the Project. We can talk about it to others, generate awareness of this issue, and bring it out in the open.

I'm reminded of what Fred Rogers (of *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*) said: "What is mentionable is manageable."

Let's begin the conversation. ■

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