Blog Focuses on Kids with Incarcerated Parents

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, PhD has been studying children and families affected by parental incarceration since she received her first National Institutes of Health grant in 2001. Julie remembers, “I first became aware of the issue in the late 1990s when I was working as a clinical psychologist at the State University of New York Health Science Center at Syracuse in the Department of Family Medicine. I started receiving referrals to evaluate young children whose mothers were incarcerated because some children were exhibiting intense social-emotional reactions following the mother’s departure, including social withdrawal, developmental regressions, significant behavior problems, and language delays. As a scientist-practitioner, I searched the child and family literature to see what was known about children affected by parental incarceration. What I found shocked me: there had been an enormous increase in children with incarcerated parents since the 1980s, but VIRTUALLY NOTHING was known about their well-being. Not even one study had collected data directly from children during a parent’s incarceration. I decided then that when I went back into academia, I would study these kids and try to help. And that’s what I did when I started my faculty position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1999.”

It has been an uphill climb for Julie, but she is pleased that society is finally starting to recognize the negative and widespread impact that decades of mass incarceration policies have had on generations of children. She cites the positive developments: “The scientific literature focusing on children with incarcerated parents has burgeoned in the past decade. President Obama has appointed an interagency subgroup focusing on children with incarcerated parents, including
representatives from 22 federal agencies, and he has commuted the sentences of more individuals than any prior president. The Department of Justice recently released a solicitation for grant applications focusing on strengthening families when a parent is incarcerated, including improving the visitation environments in corrections facilities. There is a new evidence-based parenting curriculum for incarcerated parents called Parenting Inside Out. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has had its second annual family visit day at federal corrections facilities. Even Sesame Street has a new Muppet, Alex, whose father is incarcerated."

Although the current situation represents progress, Julie feels there is still a long way to go. “Children are still being traumatized by witnessing the arrest of their parents. Few corrections facilities offer child-friendly visits. And far too many first time non-violent offenders are being incarcerated, including people who have only committed crimes of poverty (e.g., not paying parking tickets, not being able to afford bail, non-payment of child support)."

Through numerous publications and outreach efforts during the past 20 years, Julie Poehlmann-Tynan has brought the attention of child development and family studies communities to the issue of incarcerated parents and their children. She has served as an advisor to Sesame Street to help develop and evaluate their Emmy-nominated initiative for young children with incarcerated parents and their families called Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration. She has published more than 75 articles in peer-reviewed journals and is the editor of two monographs and a handbook (which is in its second edition) focusing on children with incarcerated parents.

In July 2016, Julie decided to start a blog that focused on kids with incarcerated parents. In this blog, Julie discusses issues that she has encountered in her professional role as a scientist and advocate for children whose parents are incarcerated. She posts recent
findings from her lab, links to her colleague’s research and intervention that is making a difference in the lives of children and families, and discusses issues that she presents in a graduate seminar entitled “Children with Incarcerated Parents.”

Check out Dr. Poehlmann-Tynan’s blog at www.kidswithincarceratedparents.com

Tell Us About Your Program

One of the goals of the Correctional Education Association-Wisconsin is to provide a vehicle for communication among educators who are developing programs for incarcerated parents in correctional facilities or for their families in the community. You are invited to share your ideas by contributing an article for a future issue of this newsletter.

Here are some suggestions for articles:

- Share a creative lesson plan that you use in your parenting class
- Compile a list of books and videos you use in your program
- Describe how your parent/child book project works
- Share advice on establishing a Fathers’ or Mothers’ Fair
- Describe a training workshop that you found useful
- Describe how you involve community organizations in your program
- Describe how you have made your institution more family-friendly

Email your articles to JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com
Sesame Street Celebrates Landmark 50\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary

On May 29, 2019, Sesame Workshop will celebrate Sesame Street’s landmark 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary year at the nonprofit organization’s annual benefit dinner.

Why mention Sesame Street in a newsletter dedicated to featuring programs for incarcerated parents and their families?

Sesame Street has never failed to take on tough topics. This year’s benefit will highlight Sesame Workshop’s efforts to reach vulnerable children everywhere, from their flagship television show to their wide-reaching social impact work in the United States and around the world. Sesame Street has become it one of the most enduring institutions of American culture.

Today, the organization reaches children and families in more than 150 countries, many of whom have no other access to quality early education. Throughout its run, Sesame Street has woven relatable messages about social challenges kids face into regular episodes alongside lessons on literacy, math and cooperation.

According to Lynn Chwatsky, Sesame Workshop’s vice president for initiatives, partnerships, and community engagement, Sesame Workshop has a history of trying to help kids cope with “tough to talk about topics.” In 2005, Sesame Street created resources to help kids cope with parents deployed overseas in America’s wars. Later, it went on to create tools for the times when those parents came back physically or mentally injured – or didn’t come back at all.

The work prompted a discussion about how to expand the military program to other ills of modern society. Lynn Chwatsky said, “We took a step back. This is basically resilience work. We asked ourselves, how else do you help children and the adults in their lives get through tough transitions?” In late 2012, Sesame Workshop launched a kit for kids whose parents were getting divorced. In 2013, it focused on incarcerated parents. Later, it tackled food insecurity, the death of loved ones, autism, bullying and homelessness.

Chwatsky says that parents and caregivers often struggle to communicate with their kids about prison. Children may feel ashamed or abandoned or angry about their incarcerated parent and blame themselves.
Sesame Workshop believes that the incarceration of a loved one can be overwhelming for both children and caregivers. Because of the feeling of stigma, it takes special effort to start important conversations and answer kids’ questions. But parents can comfort children and guide them through difficult moments just by talking. With love and support, the family can cope with the challenges of incarceration together.

To help kids cope, Sesame Workshop created Alex. Alex is the first Sesame Street character to have a father in prison. He’s an average kid who has some extra baggage in life and is struggling to cope. Alex appears in a bilingual toolkit of videos, a mobile app, and a storybook intended for young kids, in addition to materials for caregivers, as a way to help children cope with the emotions that come from a situation they may be too young to fully grasp.

Alex originally appeared in an on-air Sesame Street episode in 2013. He then became a part of a larger project called “Little Children, Big Challenges” which deals with the serious issues some children face. The program includes a series of online toolkits for both parents and children dealing with adversity.

*Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* is a bilingual (English/Spanish) initiative that offers tools to help caregivers with young children (ages 3–8) navigate some of the transitions and challenges that a parent’s incarceration can bring and help the children develop skills for resilience.

Sesame workshop sees service providers as playing an important role in helping families cope with the incarceration of a loved one. The *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* initiative has created resources specifically for service providers to help them guide the caregivers and children through the changes they encounter.

*Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* is designed to:

- support, comfort, and reduce anxiety, sadness, and confusion that young children may experience during the incarceration of a parent
- provide at-home caregivers with strategies, tips, and age-appropriate language they can use to help communicate with their children about incarceration
- inform incarcerated parents that they can parent from anywhere, and provide them with simple parenting tips highlighting the importance of communication

*Story Continued on page 6*
The *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* initiative components include:

- Multimedia resource kits
- Sesame Street DVD featuring a Muppet story, live-action films showcasing real children and their families, and an animated short film
- Guide for parents and caregivers
- Children’s storybook
- Sesame Street: Incarceration app for adults to use on tablets and phones
- Online toolkit with downloadable versions of all materials
- Tip sheet for incarcerated parents
- Training webinars for service providers on how to use the resources with children and families
- A playlist of featured videos from the initiative

At Sesame Workshop’s 50th Anniversary Gala former First Lady Michelle Obama will be honored with the Joan Ganz Cooney Award, named for *Sesame Street’s* creator.

“As we celebrate this milestone, we’re proud to honor First Lady Michelle Obama for all that she has done to help improve the lives of children,” said Sherrie Westin, Sesame Workshop’s President of Global Impact and Philanthropy. “From fighting childhood obesity, to supporting military families, to empowering girls the world over, Mrs. Obama is a tireless champion of children and families.”

The evening will also feature musical performances by artists like John Legend and special appearances from guests like Lin-Manuel Miranda, John Oliver, Chrissy Teigen, and the Muppets of *Sesame Street*, celebrating the organization’s 50-year history of helping kids everywhere grow smarter, stronger, and kinder.

For more information about how to get involved with Sesame Workshop, or to purchase tickets to the organization's annual benefit, please visit sesameworkshop.org/donate.
How Witnessing a Parent’s Arrest Affects a Child
By Cynthia Burnson, PhD

One day, while sitting in the home of a mother with a young boy, I asked if her son had witnessed his father’s arrest. She told me that her family was on a walk when several police cars drove up and surrounded them. Right in front of the family, police officers arrested her husband for violating parole, while her son kept asking where and why they were taking his dad. The experience instilled in her son a fear of law enforcement, she said, and he cried when he saw police cars or heard sirens. He became hypervigilant about his car seat being buckled, as someone had told him it was against the law for children to ride in cars unbuckled. The story was difficult for her to tell; it was clear the experience left her shaken and upset her son. She asked aloud: Why did they have to take him that way? Why involve my son like that?

I was in her home as part of a research project, seeking to understand more about children with a parent in jail. When talking about big concepts like criminal justice policy, the experiences of children of incarcerated parents are often left unvoiced. One area that few people consider is what happens when a child witnesses the arrest of his or her parent.

The story I heard from that mother was far from unique. I recently co-authored a chapter in the Oxford Handbook of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, focusing on the five-plus million children in the United States who have or have had a parent in jail or prison. In the chapter, we discuss what is known about the traumatic effects of witnessing incarceration-related events, including arrests, on children. No systematic data is collected on how often children are present for a parent’s arrest; however, one study of families who have been investigated by child protective services found that nearly 40% of children in the study had witnessed the arrest of a household member (Phillips & Zhao, 2010). In our research project, led by Dr. Julie Poehlmann-Tyan at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, we asked caregivers whether their child had witnessed their father’s arrest, and if so, the level of distress experienced by the child. Nearly a quarter reported their child had witnessed the arrest, and most reported the experience as “extremely distressing.”

Multiple studies have documented the trauma and subsequent suffering and difficulties experienced by children who witness parental arrests. Yet, a 2014 report by the International Association of Chiefs of Police states that many law enforcement agencies do not have specific policies in place to protect children during arrests. They propose a model policy to be adopted by law enforcement agencies that includes interagency coordination with, for example, child welfare agencies; training for officers to understand developmentally and trauma-informed ways of interacting with children; pre-arrest planning to minimize exposure of parental arrest to children; and working with the parent whenever possible to identify caregiving options for their children.

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I would add that, while efforts to minimize the traumatic effects of parental incarceration are needed, the most effective, broad-reaching, and humane approach to promoting the well-being of children of incarcerated parents is to seriously take on the scourge of mass incarceration and thereby drastically reduce the number of children exposed to parental incarceration. Avoidable threats to child development are best tackled from a prevention perspective, in which the risk itself is reduced or eliminated, rather than solely focusing on addressing the problems that arise from the threat. Mass incarceration is a public health crisis for children and families in the United States, disproportionately affecting children of color.

A father I spoke with in a state prison described the pains he took to ensure his 2-year-old daughter, for whom he was the primary caregiver, did not witness his arrest for failure to pay child support. He called his mother to watch his daughter, then called the police and waited outside for them to arrive to take him to jail. What would it take for us to put law enforcement policies in place that hold the experiences of children in mind like this father did for his daughter? Children witnessing these traumatic events do not just disappear when their parents are incarcerated. They carry their experiences with them to school, in communities, and as they grow into adulthood. I am grateful to the many caregivers who invited us into their homes and shared their stories. I heard from more than one that their reason for doing so was to shine a light on their experiences and the experiences of their children. When thinking about police practices, especially surrounding arrests, we must remember the children who are watching—and do better.

Cynthia Burnson, PhD, is a researcher with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. This blog post stems from research Dr. Burnson conducted with colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Based on this research, Dr. Burnson and her colleagues, Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, Hilary Runion, and Lindsay A. Weymouth, wrote a chapter for The Oxford Handbook of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology titled “Children with Incarcerated Parents.” The Oxford Handbook was published in January 2019.

This article first appeared on the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) blog. NCCD is an over 100-year-old organization that promotes just and equitable social systems for individuals, families, and communities through research, public policy, and practice. You can learn more at their website, www.nccdglobal.org
Dwayne Wade: Family Hero and Rescuer

Miami Heat star Dwyane Wade played in his final NBA home game on Tuesday, April 9, scoring 30 points and tallying a triple-double. The game was a fitting end to a career punctuated with leading Marquette University to the Final Four, being selected to the NBA All-Star Team 13 times, winning 3 NBA championships, and winning an Olympic Gold Medal.

Earlier that day, the release of a tear-jerking Budweiser commercial gave fans a glimpse into a different side of Wade. Basketball was an afterthought in the four-minute ad. Instead, it highlighted some of Wade’s memorable impacts in the lives of others. One of those people Dwayne impacted was his own mother, Jolinda.

Jolinda divorced from Wade’s father when he was a baby. As Jolinda’s addiction worsened, Dwayne was sent to live with his father when he was eight. In 1994, Jolinda was arrested for possession of crack cocaine with the intent to sell. While out of jail on work-release, she fled and reverted to her drug addiction. It wasn’t until 2001, when Dwayne was a sophomore playing basketball at Marquette University, that Jolinda had an epiphany at a church service and turned herself in to go to prison.

How Dwayne reacted to his mother’s addiction and imprisonment illustrates the different roles that children in dysfunctional families may play.

There are many kinds of dysfunctional families. The parents may be divorced, they may be addicted to drugs or alcohol, they may suffer from a mental illness, they may be neglecting or abusive, or they may be incarcerated. The problem with growing up in this kind of unhealthy environment is that children have to adopt roles in order to survive. Although the negative effects of living in a dysfunctional family are often highlighted, children are resilient and some may develop positive character traits that may last a lifetime.

There are many books published on the subject of Adult Children, and most agree that certain personality types are common in dysfunctional families. Not all books agree on the type name, but most agree on the characteristics.

No list of roles played by the children of incarcerated parents has been published, but a list of basic roles developed by the Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) organization and posted on the website of the Arizona chapter of ACA may apply to children of incarcerated parents. Their list may be found at https://aca-arizona.org/types-of-adult-children/ (and on the next page of this newsletter!)

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ACA’s list of roles played by children in dysfunctional families:

- **Family Hero** – The Family Hero is an achiever, usually (but not always) the oldest child. Often a workaholic who can identify other’s needs and meet them, but is without an understanding of their own needs. This is often a child who uses their success to find a sense of belonging — the one who shows the family is “all right,” but who is unable to feel the benefit of his/her achievements. They feel like a fraud and are subject to depressions which they hide from those around them.

- **The Rescuer** – The Rescuer is similar to the Family Hero, but without the visible success. The Rescuer finds those in need, lets them move in or marries them or finds a job for them while supplying others' needs and is very understanding of the frequent betrayals. They tend to feel inadequate in their giving and unable to accept help for their own needs.

- **The Mascot** – The Mascot is often a younger child who uses humor or other distracting behavior, such as being exceptional clumsy or always in trouble, to take the focus of the family away from the problems of the family dysfunction. If the parent is violently drunk, the Mascot may take the abuse to “save” the rest of the family, or may be able to crack a joke at the necessary moment to take everyone’s mind off the pain of their reality.

- **The Adjuster** – The adjuster is the one who is never bothered by what is happening; there is no reason to be excited because everyone had to live with family problems. The child never becomes too attached to goal or a desire because they have learned to change their direction at any moment. They float, knowing something is wrong but coping, often successfully, with one chaotic situation after another by surrendering their identity to the needs of the moment.

- **The Doormat** – The Doormat is the abused child who survives by lying down and letting others walk all over him/her, rather than risk an unpleasant or dangerous confrontation. This child is very understanding of the need someone else may have to injure him/her, but cannot identify his/her feelings about the abuse in the past or present.

- **The Acting Out Child or The Rebel** – This child is in action at the slightest provocation, whether as a heroic action to prevent abuse to someone else (by distracting the abuser) or to protect him/her with wildness. This is the child who is most visible to the outside world and who may adopt alcoholism, drug addiction or other compulsive behavior early in defiance of the family system.

- **The Scapegoat or Family Jerk** – This child takes the blame and shame for the actions of other family members by being the most visibly dysfunctional. This child serves the family by being sick or crazy to allow the other members of the family to ignore their own dysfunction. This is also the child who holds the family together — the family rallies to help the family jerk. He/She learns to remain dysfunctional to continue receiving the little attention available in a dysfunctional home by making the family “okay” by being the focus of all that is “not okay” which all members of the family vaguely sense.

- **The Bully** – This child is usually the victim of physical, sexual or emotional abuse, who successfully makes the mental transition to stop being the victim by victimizing others. Often the Bully is genuinely remorseful for the pain and suffering caused to others, but will continue inflicting that abuse rather than face his/her own pain.
ACA’s list of roles played by children in dysfunctional families, continued:

- **The Lost Child** – Often a younger (or the youngest) child, this personality type has learned to stay out of the way, not make his/her wants known and to expect nothing. They avoid feeling by denying that they have feelings. They adopt whatever behavior will allow them to stay invisible within the family, at work, at school or in a relationship. This is the child who can assume whatever personality those around him/her find least threatening.

- **The Last Hope** – Similar to the Lost Child, the Last Hope is the caretaker for the family when all other members have become unable to continue their roles. Often the Last Child is raised on comments like “You’ll never hurt me like so-and-so.” These children may work themselves to death trying to do “what’s right” for blood relations or adopted families, no matter what the expense to their own life.

Although her addiction landed Jolinda in prison when he was 8, Dwayne Wade never gave up on his mom.

Dwayne gravitated to the Family Hero and Rescuer roles. No matter how many times his mother failed him, he continued to support her. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Dwayne told her, “I never gave up on her. Never blamed her. Because that was her life, her journey, her path. Without that path, I’m not who I am today.”

Jolinda embraced Christianity while in prison, where she had visions of being a pastor. She studied ministry upon her release and became an ordained minister.

In 2008, Dwayne gave his mother an unimaginable gift: her own church, then called the Temple of Praise.

In the less than two decades both son and mother have changed their lives and touched the lives of many others. “Everybody thinks I’m the miraculous story in the family. I think she is,” Dwayne told the Associated Press. “I think what I’ve done means I’ve been very blessed, but she’s been more than blessed. She’s been anointed.”
Editor’s Message

As you may have noticed, the design of the Parenting Connection newsletter has been updated. When the Parenting Connections newsletter published its first issue 15 years ago, it used a format created by Sandy Sterr-Heavener, Program Assistant at WRC. That same newsletter format has been used until this issue.

Amanda Hillestad, a teacher at Jackson Correctional Institution has taken on the challenge to update the appearances of the Parenting Connection newsletter and the CEA-Wisconsin newsletter. She has also become their co-editor, working with Jerry Bednarowski.

Also in need of modernization is the CEA-Wisconsin website. Chisim Metternich, a teacher at the Wisconsin Resource Center, has volunteered to be the new webmaster.

Chisim goal is to make the www.ceawisconsin.org more dynamic and user-friendly. As the new Webmaster, Chisim will be responsible for managing the content of the CEA-Wisconsin’s entire internet presence. He will also perform day-to-day site maintenance, set standards for design, perform navigation and browser compatibility, perform quality-control for third party content, and maintain and develop small web applications.

The CEA-Wisconsin website will continue to post all of the issues of the Parenting Connection newsletter and the booklets, Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families and Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors in Prisons and Jails.

The Parenting Connection newsletter is a publication of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Correctional Education Association. The opinions herein are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the CEA-Wisconsin executive officers or the CEA-Wisconsin membership as a whole.

Articles for publication in the Parenting Connection newsletter may be submitted to the Parenting Connection Newsletter Co-Editors: Jerry Bednarowski at jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com or Amanda Hillestad at Amanda.Hillestad@wisconsin.gov.

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