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# research

## in action

Mentoring: A Promising Intervention  
for Children of Prisoners



## About the Research in Action Series

### Overview

Last year, MENTOR released the *National Agenda for Action: How to Close America's Mentoring Gap*. Representing the collective wisdom of the mentoring field, the *Agenda* articulates five key strategies and action items necessary to move the field forward and truly close the mentoring gap. In an effort to address one of these critical strategies—elevating the role of research—MENTOR created the Research and Policy Council, an advisory group composed of the nation's leading mentoring researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

In September 2006, MENTOR convened the first meeting of the Research and Policy Council with the goal of increasing the connection and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to strengthen the practice of youth mentoring. The *Research in Action* series is the first product to evolve from the work of the Council—taking current mentoring research and translating it into useful, user-friendly materials for mentoring practitioners.

With research articles written by leading scholars, the series includes ten issues on some of the most pressing topics facing the youth mentoring field:

- Issue 1: Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development
- Issue 2: Effectiveness of Mentoring Program Practices
- Issue 3: Program Staff in Youth Mentoring Programs: Qualifications, Training, and Retention
- Issue 4: Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs
- Issue 5: Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End
- Issue 6: School-Based Mentoring
- Issue 7: Cross-Age Peer Mentoring
- Issue 8: Mentoring Across Generations: Engaging Age 50+ Adults as Mentors
- Issue 9: Youth Mentoring: Do Race and Ethnicity Really Matter?
- Issue 10: Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

## Using the Series

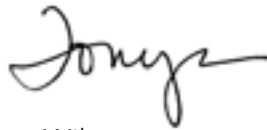
Each issue in the series is designed to make the scholarly research accessible to and relevant for practitioners and is composed of three sections:

1. **Research:** a peer-reviewed article, written by a leading researcher, summarizing the latest research available on the topic and its implications for the field;
2. **Action:** a tool, activity, template, or resource, created by MENTOR, with concrete suggestions on how practitioners can incorporate the research findings into mentoring programs; and
3. **Resources:** a list of additional resources on the topic for further research.

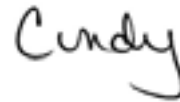
As you read the series, we invite you to study each section and consider what you can do to effectively link mentoring research with program practice. Please join us in thanking the executive editor, Dr. Jean Rhodes, and the author of this issue, Shay Bilchik, J.D., for graciously contributing their time and expertise to this project.



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Tonya Wiley  
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Vice President

## Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

Shay Bilchik, J.D., *Georgetown University*

### Introduction and Overview

Incarceration rates have increased substantially in the United States over the past several decades (Travis et al., 2001; U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, [www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs)). As crime rates spiked in this country in the 1980's, so did the call for more punitive and accountability-based approaches to stem the rising tide of crime. While the debate continues as to the wisdom of the policies that resulted from this crack-down on crime, including the jailing of more drug and other non-violent offenders and longer sentences for violent offenders, there seems to be little controversy over the fact that this trend has caused what one could term "collateral damage." This damage isn't to the offenders, victims, or the communities from which the offenders enter local jails or state correctional facilities and federal prisons; although one could argue that the damage resides there as well. The damage is to the children of those offenders, negatively impacted by the incarceration of their parents. It is a group—that, along with their families, has been described as more at-risk than any other subculture in this country (Travis et al., 2001).

To better understand children of prisoners, it is necessary to understand the scope of this problem, the life circumstances facing the children and their parents at the time of incarceration, the impact of the incarceration on the children from a developmental perspective, and the potential benefit different types of interventions may provide. This paper explores these issues and the specific benefit mentoring may provide as an intervention.

### The Scope of the Problem and Life Circumstances of the Children and Parents

It is estimated that more than two million children have a parent incarcerated in state and federal prisons and local jails (Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), 2001; Mumola, 2000). From 1991 to 2001 the number of children with parents in prison jumped by more than 50 percent (Mumola, 2001). Twenty-two percent of children whose parents are incarcerated are under five years of age, with approximately half under ten (CWLA, 2001). The mean age is eight (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Most of the children in question have fathers who are incarcerated, but an estimated 8–10 percent have mothers in jail (CWLA, 2001; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). This has become an increasingly important factor as the rate of incarceration has increased for mothers (Dallaire, 2006), and research finds that this specific group of children are one of the most vulnerable and at-risk populations (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2004). Children and parents of color are

disproportionately represented in this population, as are the poor, with black children being nine times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent (CWLA, 2001). In fact, young people impacted by parental incarceration already face several risk factors in their lives and tend to experience life circumstances that include poverty, instability, and reduced access to sources of support (Travis et al., 2001). This assessment is consistent with research from other countries, as observed in a recent article by Murray (2007), noting the social exclusion experienced by these children and their families in England. This social exclusion consists of pre-existing deprivation, loss of material and social capital following imprisonment, stigma, and diminished future prospects.

The living situation of children of prisoners varies significantly. Many of them were living with non-parental caregivers prior to the incarceration of their parent, with only half of the inmate parents living with their children at the time of admission to prison (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Mothers lived with their children at higher rates at the time of incarceration (state facilities: 64 percent; federal facilities: 84 percent) than fathers (state facilities: 44 percent; federal facilities: 55 percent) (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). As reported in several studies, meaningful social relationships may or may not be in place between children and their non-resident parents (Furstenberg et al., 1987). This impacts both the immediate and long-term effects on the children of incarcerated non-resident parents. For instance, when a father is arrested, mothers assume or maintain caregiving responsibility 90 percent of the time, resulting in somewhat less disruption to the child's life (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Coltrane, 1996). Conversely, when mothers are incarcerated, fathers assume responsibility only 28–31 percent of the time (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Coltrane, 1996). Instead, grandparents assume responsibility approximately half the time, with other relatives and friends assuming responsibility most often when grandparents are not available or physically or financially able to take care of the children (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Coltrane, 1996). Fewer than 10 percent of the children of mothers and 4 percent of the children of fathers are placed in foster care (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Coltrane, 1996).

The length of a parent's incarceration also has an effect on the experience of the child. Fathers serve an average of 80 months in state prison and 103 months in federal prison; whereas mothers serve shorter sentences. It is reported, for example, that sentences average 49 and 66 months in state and federal facilities respectively for female offenders (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). The disparity in the length of sentence relates in part to the fact that fathers are nearly twice as likely to be incarcerated for violent offenses (Gadsden & Rethemeyer, 2001). This differential in length of sentence and type of offense results in a more short-term impact on children when a mother is incarcerated and both a short- and long-term impact when a father is incarcerated, including the reduced possibility of renewing the father-child ties (Gadsden & Rethemeyer, 2001). Further complicating this picture for children of incarcerated mothers, is the fact that their mothers are more likely than fathers to enter prison with some identified mental illness (23 percent versus 13 percent for fathers). Mothers are also more likely than fathers to report

extensive and serious histories of drug use, fewer economic resources (30 percent on welfare), and a history of physical or sexual abuse (60 percent) (Travis et al., 2001; Richie, 2000; Dallaire, 2006). Both fathers and mothers who are incarcerated live with chronic health problems, with two to three percent of the prison population being HIV positive or having AIDS, 18 percent infected with hepatitis C, and seven percent suffering from a tuberculosis infection. These rates are five to ten times greater than those in the general population (Travis et al., 2001; Hammett, 2000).

As will be discussed later, each of these factors has an effect, to some degree, on the development of the children and the design of the interventions needed to support them both during the period of incarceration and the re-entry of their parents into their lives upon release.

## A Developmental Perspective

To fully understand the impact of parental incarceration, one needs to take into consideration the variables above, in the context of the various stages of the arrest and incarceration process (arrest, imprisonment, and re-entry), along with the age and stage of development of the child in question (Travis et al., 2001; CWLA, 2001). In this regard, being a child of an incarcerated parent is a unique experience that changes over time. Programs designed to intervene in a positive manner must take these considerations into account (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002).

It is estimated that one in five children are present at the time of the arrest of their mother (Johnston, 1991). More than half of them are under seven years of age, with these children reporting nightmares and flashbacks to the arrest incident (Jose-Kampfner, 1995). Children in middle school may be at school at the time of the arrest and come home to an empty home and no explanation about the uncertainties they are experiencing as they are moved to the care of a relative or into foster care (Fishman, 1983). Many children experience what has been termed “the conspiracy of silence,” in which it is believed that it is better for the child to know very little about what has happened to their incarcerated parent (Jose-Kampfner, 1995; Johnston, 1995). The explanations they receive could be described as being of a cursory, distorted, or deceptive nature (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). This is exacerbated by the fact that studies show that there is often an unwillingness of family, friends, and caregivers to discuss the parent’s incarceration more broadly (Snyder-Joy & Carlo, 1998). As will be discussed later, this phenomenon has an impact both on the way these children cope with their parent’s arrest and incarceration and the manner in which individuals who are attempting to support them engage with the children and their caregivers.

In light of what we know about children’s coping (Ayers et al., 1996), it comes as no surprise that children who are uninformed about their parent’s incarceration are undermined in their ability to cope and are left more anxious and fearful (Johnston, 1995).



It is argued that children need honest, factual information and their experience validated (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). This allows them to better understand their situation and begin the dual process of grieving and coping (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). It is worthy of note that the impact of a more full disclosure on family jobs, child custody, and housing provides some legitimate motivation to engage in what Johnston calls the “forced silence” around what has happened to the parent (Johnston, 1995). Once again, these circumstances have an effect on the level of communication and nature of the relationship the child will have with individuals stepping forward to support them as they try to cope with their parent’s incarceration.

While a mother maintaining custody of a child when the father is arrested may provide stability in caregiving, the ultimate outcome of how well the mother and child do is contingent on the strength of the family connections that will be needed to support the family as they face increased financial and social pressures (Seymour, 1998). When a mother is incarcerated and a grandparent assumes responsibility for raising the child, they will face emotional, physical, and financial challenges (Young & Smith, 2000). Complicating this situation is the fact that the relationship between the grandmother and incarcerated mother may become strained as a result of the criminal behavior, reflecting negative feelings such as resentment, anger, guilt, or disappointment (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Young & Smith, 2000). This further complicates decision making on behalf of the child, which may impact how individuals who seek to provide support for the child are able to engage him or her.

A look at the individual stages of development and the potential impact of the incarceration of a parent on each stage, gives us a glimpse at how mentoring or other efforts to remediate that damage must be targeted.

While separation from a parent with whom the child has formed a strong connection can be assumed to be traumatic regardless of age (Thompson, 1998; Bowlby, 1973), the separation of an infant or young child from a mother has particularly significant consequences related to attachment between the mother and child (Myers et al., 1999; Thompson, 1998; CWLA, 2005). We also know through Dallaire’s research that this concern is more pertinent in terms of changes in caregiving patterns when mothers are incarcerated as compared to fathers (2006). These children are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems (Myers et al., 1999). Insecure attachments—one of the results from adverse shifts in life circumstances—have been linked to poorer peer relationships and diminished cognitive abilities (Sroufe, 1988). Bowlby found that separation from the primary caregiver during infancy and the toddler years is a serious risk factor for later maladaptive outcomes (Bowlby, 1973). These separations, resulting in the greater likelihood of disorganized attachment classifications, are considered risk factors for later difficulties (Zeanah & Fox, 2004). The children with this classification do not have an organized set of strategies to gain and maintain the attention of their caregivers to get their needs met (Cassidy & Mohr, 2001). In one estimate, 70 percent of young children with incarcerated



mothers had emotional or psychological problems (Baunach, 1985). The problems exhibited include internalizing behaviors such as anxiety, withdrawal, hyper vigilance, depression, shame, and guilt (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). The externalizing behaviors exhibited include anger, aggression, and hostility to caregivers and siblings (Johnston, 1995; Jose-Kampfner, 1995; Fishman, 1983).

School-aged children are confronted with another set of issues. Displacements in home and school settings contribute to instability and make a familiar and comfortable academic learning environment difficult to maintain (George & LaLonde, 2002). This circumstance makes it less likely that these children will develop a meaningful connection to what could be a major socializing force—the school—and more likely that they will become delinquent later in adolescence (Green & Scholes, 2004; Hirschi, 1969). It also may exacerbate preexisting academic difficulties, with significantly lower Stanford-Binet IQ scores being reported for this group of children when compared to published norms (Poehlman, 2005b). School-aged children may also experience shame and embarrassment as a result of their mother's behavior and incarceration (Johnston, 1995). It has been found, however, that social supports for children and a sense of hopefulness are protective factors against the development of both internalizing and externalizing problems, regardless of the number of stressful life events a child may have experienced (Hagen & Myers, 2003; Hagen et al., 2005).

Adolescents become competent as they learn to strike a balance between individuation and connectedness (Cooper et al., 1983). In order to find success during this developmental stage, they must manage to remain connected to socializing institutions like family, friends, and school while at the same time asserting themselves as individuals (Cooper et al., 1983). This is a time of boundary testing and the impact of parental incarceration has been found to lead to the rejection of limit setting attempts by both their parents and other adults (Eddy & Reid, 2002). Attempts to develop and set parameters around mentoring relationships with these young people will likely be met with the same challenging behavior.

Once again there is a distinction in the experience of children whose mothers are incarcerated compared to children of incarcerated fathers. Adolescent children of incarcerated mothers are three times more likely than their peers to drop out of high school and engage in more delinquent behavior such as lying, cheating, and stealing (Johnston, 1995; Myers et al., 1999). Compared to incarcerated fathers, incarcerated mothers report that their adolescent children had more trouble with the law (Tennessee Department of Corrections, 1995). Feelings of connectedness to family structures may reduce the chances that the adolescent will engage in delinquent behavior (Kierkus & Baer, 2002). In fact, when adolescent children of incarcerated mothers receive the kind of stable and supportive care that promotes strong connections to school, pro-social peers, and family, they are less likely to engage in risky and delinquent behavior (Dallaire, 2006).

Unfortunately, programs are not readily available for children of prisoners to assist them during this difficult time of their life (Travis et al., 2001; CWLA, 2005). Compounding this problem, relatively few inmates receive the treatment or supports they need while in prison or during re-entry that would facilitate an appropriate connection and role in their child's life (Travis et al., 2001).

In summary, there are some general conclusions that can be drawn as to how children experience the loss of a parent: while age may impact the extent of the trauma, children always experience the separation from a parent for any significant length of time as a traumatic and important life event. This trauma pulls them away from their normal developmental path; the trauma is exacerbated by situations with heightened levels of uncertainty (the "conspiracy of silence" and changes in caregiving). Children's responses to the separation will change over time, from short-term crisis responses at the time of arrest and immediate incarceration, to the long-term responses during any extended period of incarceration and re-entry. Children feel the stigma of having a parent arrested and placed in prison with their peer group, their family members and teachers, and more broadly, their neighborhoods (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Eddy & Reid, 2002).

To summarize Erikson's developmental stage theory and the impact of arrest and incarceration from a developmental perspective:

- the development of trust and attachment for infants (0-2 years) is affected by impaired parent-child bonding;
- the development of a sense of autonomy, independence and initiative for 2-6 year olds is negatively affected, resulting in inappropriate separation anxiety, impaired socio-emotional development, and acute traumatic stress reactions;
- the development of a sense of industry and ability to work productively for 7-10 year olds is instead a period reflective of developmental regressions, poor self-concept, acute traumatic stress reactions, and an impaired ability to overcome future trauma;
- the development of the ability to work productively with others and to control the expression of emotions that occurs for early adolescents between 11-14 years of age, is instead characterized by a rejection of limits on behavior and trauma-reactive behaviors; and
- the development of a cohesive identity, the resolution of conflicts with family and society, and the ability to engage in adult work and relationships that is usually accomplished during late adolescence (15-18 years) is diminished, negatively impacted by the premature termination of the dependency relationship with the parent and the greater likelihood of intergenerational crime and incarceration (Gabel & Johnston, 1995).

In each of the five stages above the developmental task is negatively influenced by the parent-child separation and the trauma it causes (Gabel & Johnston, 1995).

While there are certain limitations relating to the aforementioned research, for example, the size of the samples, the representative nature of the samples, the reliance of self reported data, and a lack of multiple informants and longitudinal data (Gaudin & Suthpen, 1993; Kazura, 2001; Houck & Loper, 2002), the existing literature does provide us with confidence in drawing the conclusions noted above about the effect of parental incarceration on children.

### **Mentoring Children of Prisoners – A Hopeful Intervention**

Studies conducted on mentoring programs designed for the average youth resulted in children being significantly less likely to begin using drugs or alcohol, skip school, or engage in violence than their peers (Sipe, 1996). Further analysis revealed that mentoring actually slowed the onset of, but did not actually prevent, the outcome behaviors studied (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Jekielek et al., in 2002, in a review of existing literature, concluded that mentoring leads to better attitudes toward school, fewer absences, reductions in aggressive behavior, less drug and alcohol abuse, improved relationships with parents, and an increased likelihood of going to college. The development of better relationships with their families and other adults has also been found to be a result of successful mentoring matches (Rhodes et al., 2005). Research even more pertinent to children of prisoners was conducted by DuBois et al., in which a meta-analysis of 55 mentoring programs found that while mentoring programs provided only modest benefit to average youth, they were more effective with “high-risk” groups (DuBois et al., 2002). These findings were supported in a later study by Bauldrey (2006), in which it was found that mentoring may provide some protection against depression among high-risk youth, but is less likely to serve as a remedy when youth are already depressed. As is also reflected in other research around mentoring, the longer the mentoring relationship the greater benefit, with those high-risk youth who were mentored at least six months being 69 percent less likely to show signs of depression on follow up than the control group (Bauldrey, 2006). Other findings in Bauldrey’s work focusing on high-risk youth showed that young people mentored for at least six months were 75 percent less likely to use marijuana; youth who did not show signs of depression at the six month follow up were 58 percent less likely to report being arrested (2006).

When successfully implemented, it is expected that mentoring programs for children of prisoners have the potential to improve children’s socio-emotional skills, increase their capacity for attachments, and produce stronger, healthier relationships between children and significant others, leading to better outcomes in social and academic competence (Johnston, 2002; Rhodes, 2002). Through the provision of supplemental attachment

figures and interpersonal experiences, they create shared narratives and refine or repair their attachment skills (Johnston, 2002; Rhodes, 2002). Another approach utilized with this population is to provide mentors as positive role models, leading children in a different direction than the one taken by the imprisoned parent (Amachi, 2004). Yet others seek to provide mentees with the tools they need to gain academic skills and confidence (U.S. Dream Academy, 2004), or simply provide friendship and recreational activities in order to build confidence and interpersonal skills (Big Brothers Big Sisters, 2004). In truth, children of prisoners to a certain degree can benefit from all of the above approaches, but their overarching need is for meaningful relationships with individuals committed to a lasting connection (Adalist-Estrin & Lee, 2004). While the limited amount of research completed to date suggests this to be true, there is a need for research with stronger evaluation designs to further support these conclusions.

In this regard, it has been found that failed mentoring matches may do harm to mentees (Rhodes, 2002). Rhodes concluded that early terminations decrease feelings of self-worth and academic self-confidence, resulting in lower levels of prosocial activities and school attendance. The importance of an appropriate emphasis and adequate resources devoted to mentoring matches, and training and support for those mentors, cannot be overstated when it comes to working with children of prisoners (DuBois et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002). If we are to be successful in keeping these children away from risky and delinquent behavior, it is absolutely essential that any intervention helps to bolster stable and supportive care that will promote strong connections to school, pro-social peers, and family (Dallaire, 2006).

It has been found, as noted earlier in this paper, that social supports for children and a sense of hopefulness are protective factors against the development of both internalizing and externalizing problems, regardless of the number of stressful life events a child may have experienced (Hagen & Myers, 2003; Hagen et al., 2005). As reported by Johnston, mentoring can be a positive intervention as it provides a developmental resource and support for children who have experienced the negative developmental impact of parent-child separation and associated trauma (Johnston, 1995).

In light of the challenges the children of prisoners and their families present, it is clear that the role mentoring can play comes with risks and opportunities. The opportunity is to provide a much needed greater sense of hope, along with a supportive individual in the child's life. The risk is the damage that can be done to an already fragile set of life circumstances through mentoring that doesn't meet the higher quality demanded for this population (Johnston, 2005). As reported by Johnston, these high-quality programs must address the diverse and often changing set of living arrangements these children experience before and after the incarceration of their parent (Johnston, 2003; Mumola, 2000). Training within these programs needs to include, for example, working with the mentors to understand best how to deal with issues around requests to visit a parent in prison or

to assist the child during the period of re-entry (Mumola, 2000; Johnston, 1995). Recruiting mentors who are likely to have the interest and skills to work effectively with children of criminal offenders becomes an important ingredient in creating a successful program (Darling et al., 2002; Rhodes et al., 1992; Zimmerman et al., 2002). Johnston (2002) advises seeking mentors who are non-judgmental, able to self-regulate, capable of mutual regulation within relationships, and able to maintain boundaries in interactions with others.

In mentoring programs working with average youth, it has been found that mentors who interacted with parents have significantly better outcomes than comparison groups (Grossman, 2000). Mentors need the tools therefore, to respond to both their mentees and the families in ways that will support each child's relationship with his or her family and engender the family's support of the mentoring relationship (Lee, 2005). In fact, mentors who understand the background and circumstances facing their mentees' parents and families will be better prepared to support that young person, including engaging with caregivers and family members (Adalist-Estrin & Mustin, 2003; Adalist-Estrin, 2005).

This engagement includes connecting the mentee and/or family to other supportive services when appropriate—recognizing that while mentoring is a valuable tool, it is one of a number of interventions that may be needed by the child and family. This also points to the need for strong screening guidelines for mentees. High-quality programs will facilitate the identification of low functioning youth through a developmentally oriented assessment, leading when appropriate to the referral for more substantive interventions—either in tandem with mentoring or as an alternative supportive approach (Jekielek et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002).

For the average youth mentee, the end of the mentoring relationship may not prove to be traumatic, even if ending in a disappointing fashion. Their resilience helps them to buffer the negative experience. This is not the case, however, for children of prisoners who have experienced multiple developmental setbacks. Instead, the ending of the mentoring relationship is likely to be experienced as a further loss that may have very adverse emotional and behavioral reactions (Ingram, Johnston, & North, 2003). Good programs will not only work hard to secure good matches with mentors prepared to work with a challenging population, but will have in place supportive devices to help those children who do experience matches that terminate early or poorly (Johnston, 2005).

One particular mentoring program model, Amachi, specifically targets children of prisoners. Early results of the impact of the program, based on a review of the first 556 matches found that mentors and mentees spent time together in ways consistent with Public/Private Venture's research on effective programs (Farley, 2004; Jucovy, 2003).

While mentors met with their mentees fewer times on average than required by the program guidelines, they did spend more time with their mentee each month than required due to longer individual visits (Farley, 2004). The review of the 556 matches created from April 2001 through March 2003, found 312 still active (56 percent), with 189 of those meeting for 12 months or longer (Jacovy, 2003). Of the 244 matches that had ended, in 79 cases the mentor had fulfilled at least their one year commitment (one third lasted 18 months) and decided not to continue with the relationship (Jacovy, 2003). The remaining matches, 165 in total, terminated in less than 12 months, with the majority ending because of circumstances related to the children—from the child moving from the area, to a parent or guardian not wanting the relationship to continue (Jacovy, 2003). Survey results showed that after one year 93 percent of mentors and 82 percent of caregivers reported increased levels of mentee self-confidence, with about 60 percent of mentors and caregivers reporting an improved sense of the future and over half reporting better academic performance and school behavior (Farley, 2004). There were no positive outcomes for relationships that lasted less than six months, and the only positive outcome in relationships lasting 6–12 months was fewer days skipping school (Jacovy, 2003). The one-year mark appears to be of significance in achieving positive outcomes for the mentees. While these outcomes were not found as part of a rigorous evaluation, they are promising and important when considered in the context of the developmental challenges these children face. They also highlight the challenges presented by this particular population.

## Conclusion

In closing, it is clear that the framing provided by Ann Adalist-Estrin for working with children of prisoners seems appropriate. She dissected the word “mentor” into its likely derivation from the Greek words *mentos*, meaning “with purpose, spirit, and passion,” and *meno*, “to remain, abide, continue, be present, wait, and endure.” In the world of a child who has known too little parental purpose, passion, and consistent love and presence, there can be no greater gift than the support and commitment of a mentor.

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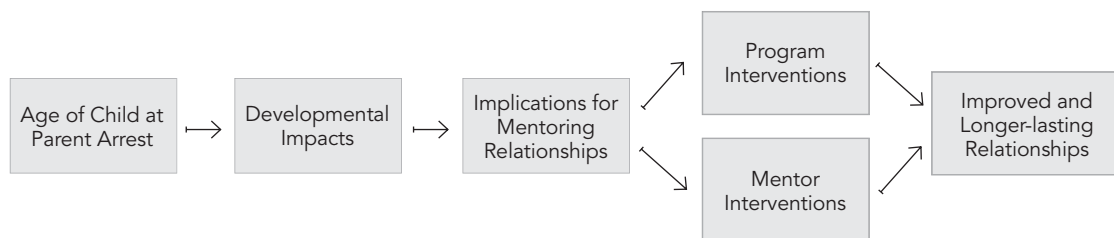
## Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

In the 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush called on Congress to provide \$450 million over three years dedicated to mentoring disadvantaged middle-school children and children whose parents are incarcerated. The speech created a national spotlight on the challenges facing children of prisoners and sparked a commitment to serving this unique population of young people. The success of many programs, including Amachi, demonstrates that mentoring done well can be a valuable intervention and promote positive outcomes for children of prisoners. However, the exuberance with which many organizations embarked on creating programs for children of prisoners has been tempered by numerous challenges in serving them effectively.

Many of these programs began with little or no knowledge of or experience with the unique needs of children of prisoners. In his article, Mr. Bilchik provides insight into the personal and environmental challenges children of prisoners face and offers a developmental perspective on the impacts associated with the incarceration of a parent. This action section demonstrates how those developmental impacts could affect a mentoring relationship, offers strategies for mentors and mentees to counter them, and provides general strategies for working with this population.

### Part I: A Model

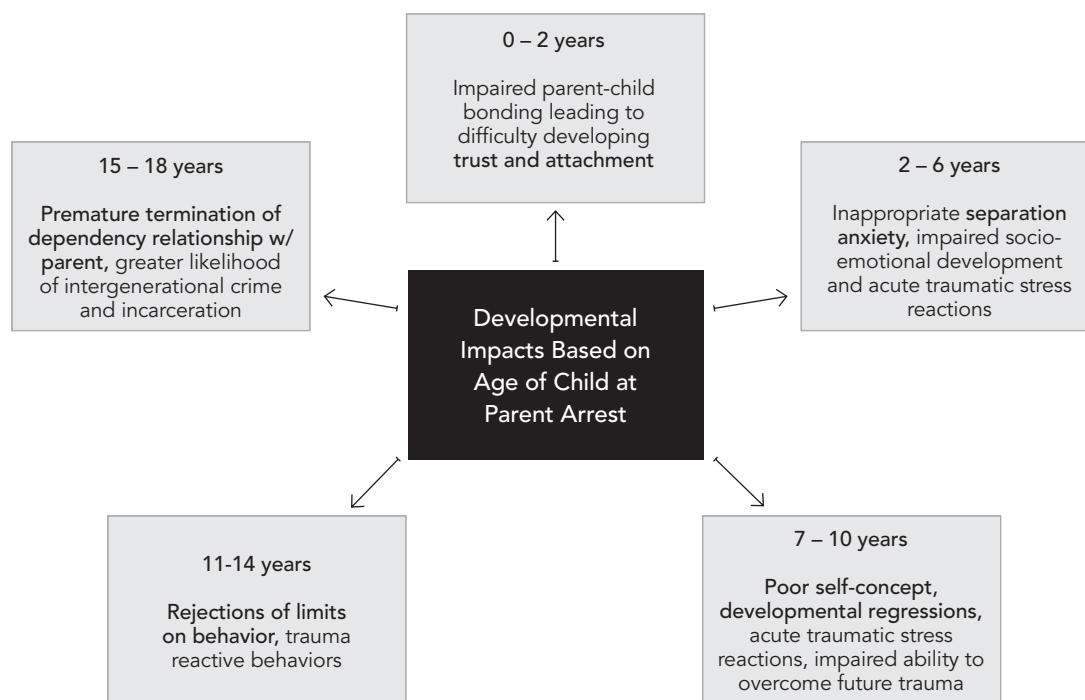
The figure below demonstrates the relationship among various components involved in successful mentoring for children of prisoners using a developmental model. Reading the diagram from left to right, the age of the child when the parent is arrested results in specific developmental impacts. These developmental impacts have implications for any mentoring relationship for that child. However, there are strategies that mentoring programs and mentors can use to reach the ultimate goal: improved, longer-lasting relationships as indicated in the box on the far right. Each of these components is described in more detail below.



## Key Ideas to Keep in Mind

- While many children of prisoners face common challenges and share similar characteristics, each child is a unique individual and should be treated as such.
- The arrest/incarceration of a parent is traumatic and pulls children away from the normal path of development.
- There are many stages of incarceration including arrest, pre-trial detention, imprisonment, and release/re-entry that have unique effects on the child and his/her family.
- There are a number of complicating factors (e.g., the conspiracy of silence, economic issues, etc.) that effect the life situation of these children and their families and further disrupt normal development.
- However, the presence of certain factors including social supports and a sense of hopefulness can mediate the impact of parental incarceration on child development.

## Part II: Developmental Impacts of Parental Incarceration by Age of Child at Arrest





### Part III: Implications for Mentoring Relationships

Age of Child at Parent Arrest	Developmental Impact (from diagram)	Possible Implications for Mentoring Relationships
0-2	Trust and attachment	Research suggests that the quality and impact of mentoring relationships is based on the closeness of the bond between mentor and mentee. For mentees with trust and attachment challenges, developing that bond may be difficult.
2-6	Separation anxiety	Mentees with separation anxiety may have difficulty establishing appropriate boundaries in relationships. This could manifest itself as being overly needy/attached or, conversely, by remaining detached and distant to prevent future disappointment.
7-10	Poor self-concept, developmental regressions	Mentees with low self-esteem may not believe they are worthy of “good” things, including their mentors. This belief may cause them to act out or hold back emotionally. It may also result in behavior that is not age appropriate. Mentors who are not prepared may find it difficult to connect to these mentees, prohibiting the development of a close relationship.
11-14	Rejections of limits on behavior	Mentees may have difficulty working w/others and controlling emotions which can make forming a close relationship difficult. In community-based mentoring especially, mentors may feel uncomfortable with a mentee who has trouble respecting boundaries (e.g., safety, contact, etc.)
15-18	Premature termination of dependency relationship w/parent	Mentees may have difficulty trusting and engaging in relationships with adults which could lead to rejection of the mentor or behavior that challenges the mentor’s role to provide guidance and support.

### Part IV: Program Interventions – What Can Programs Do to Improve Mentor-Mentee Relationships?

In addition to following the Elements of Effective Practice™—guidelines for running safe and effective youth mentoring programs—programs working with children of prisoners should pay special attention to the following key practices.

**Expectations:** Establish clear expectations with mentors, mentees, families/caregivers, and incarcerated parents about:

1. Commitment – how long will the mentor-mentee relationship last?
2. Meetings – what are the expected frequency and duration of contacts and meetings for mentor-mentee pairs?

3. Relationship – what do typical relationships look like? Provide examples or scenarios based on actual matches in the program.
4. Outcomes – what are the realistic results that mentors can expect to see?

**Involvement:** Involve all key stakeholders, as appropriate, in the success of the match including:

1. Families/caregivers – respect matching preferences, provide additional resources, or host activities or support groups.
2. Incarcerated parents – engage the parents from the outset, keep them informed about the relationship, and develop plans to continue the match after their release from prison.

**Screening:** Expand the screening process to address issues specific to serving children of prisoners:

1. Mentors – determine their skills and comfort levels with various characteristics of children of prisoners, as well as how they deal with challenging situations.
2. Mentees – get to know each child. If possible, determine the age of the child when the parent was incarcerated and any developmental challenges that he or she may face.

**Mentee Training:** Prepare mentees to actively participate in a mentoring relationship by addressing important topics:

1. Communication skills – teach mentees how to express thoughts and emotions in a productive way and how to communicate effectively with mentors.
2. Building relationships – ask mentees what they can do to make their relationships last, include concepts such as honesty, respect, trust, and consistency.
3. Boundaries – establish clear guidelines for what is and what is not acceptable.
4. “Using” their mentor – prepare mentees to take advantage of the opportunities, networks, and resources of their mentor by asking for help and assistance.

**Mentor Training:** Create comprehensive initial and ongoing training, using external partners where appropriate, to provide mentors with information on the following:

1. Children of prisoners – discuss the needs, challenges, strengths and assets of this population.
2. Environmental factors – describe the environment in which these children and their families live. These include the likelihood that the mentee will change residences and caretakers during the mentoring relationship, as well as the impact on the child of the conspiracy of silence; the stigma and shame of the arrest and incarceration of their parent; and the economic complications of incarceration.
3. Developmental stages of youth – explain the physical, social, and emotional characteristics typical of youth during various stages of development.
4. Building relationships – ask mentors what they can do to make their relationships last, include concepts such as honesty, respect, trust, and consistency.
5. Communication skills – teach mentors to communicate effectively with mentees through active listening and other techniques.
6. Values and beliefs – encourage mentors to examine their values and to respect those of others.
7. Boundaries – establish clear guidelines for what is and what is not acceptable. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the possible desire of the mentee for the mentor to serve as an intermediary in their relationship with their incarcerated parent.

**Policies and Procedures:** Develop additional policies and procedures that are specific to working with children of prisoners about:

1. Truth – strongly encourage families/caregivers to tell the child the truth about the incarcerated parent.
2. Closure – premature terminations can be especially devastating to children of prisoners; a process that respects the needs and feelings of these youth is essential.
3. Release/re-entry – develop a process that allows the match to continue and thrive after the release/re-entry of the parent.

**Support and Supervision:** Provide regular supervision and support to identify any challenges the match may be facing. Offer encouragement and assist with problem-solving and generating new activities. Recognize mentors for their patience and willingness to “hang in there” when things are tough, as well as for their successes when things go well.

### **Part V: Mentor Interventions – What Can Mentors Do to Improve Their Relationships With Mentees?**

- Be consistent, patient, and flexible.
- Have realistic expectations about the challenges or obstacles mentees may face in building a relationship as well as the potential outcomes that will result.
- Hold mentees accountable. Establish expectations that are high but achievable and express confidence in the mentee’s ability to achieve them.
- Ask for help and support from program staff and other mentors when feeling overwhelmed or unsure.
- Honor their commitment to the child and the relationship.

## Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

**Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents.** Organization that sponsors the development of model services for children of criminal offenders and their families. [www.e-ccjp.org](http://www.e-ccjp.org)

**Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN).** Provides resources and networking opportunities to equip people of faith, congregations, philanthropists, and public administrators with collaborative opportunities to renew urban communities. [www.fastennetwork.org](http://www.fastennetwork.org)

- People of Faith Mentoring Children of Promise  
[www.fastennetwork.org/Uploads/2C16CC3C-DB30-4C26-9D54-0596C409E1AA.pdf](http://www.fastennetwork.org/Uploads/2C16CC3C-DB30-4C26-9D54-0596C409E1AA.pdf)

**Family and Corrections Network.** Organization that provides opportunities for those concerned with families of prisoners to share information and experiences in an atmosphere of mutual respect. [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org)

**MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership.** The leader in expanding the power of mentoring to millions of young Americans who want and need adult mentors. [www.mentoring.org](http://www.mentoring.org)

- Mentoring Children of Prisoners, article from Research Corner.  
[www.mentoring.org/program\\_staff/research\\_corner/mentoring\\_children\\_of\\_prisoners.php](http://www.mentoring.org/program_staff/research_corner/mentoring_children_of_prisoners.php)

**National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth.** Provides links, resources, and information for youth service workers. [www.ncfy.com](http://www.ncfy.com)

- THE EXCHANGE: Mentoring as a Tool for Positive Youth Development. March 2005.  
[www.ncfy.com/publications/march2005.htm](http://www.ncfy.com/publications/march2005.htm)

**San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents.** Coalition of Bay Area social service, non-profit, government, and advocacy groups that are concerned with assisting children of incarcerated parents. [www.sfcipp.org](http://www.sfcipp.org)

- Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights  
[www.sfcipp.org](http://www.sfcipp.org)

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.** Federal government agency that seeks to improve the health, safety, and well-being of all Americans. [www.hhs.gov/children/index.html](http://www.hhs.gov/children/index.html)

- YES!—Youth Empowerment Strategies For All: Working with Children of Prisoners  
[www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/aboutfysb/yes\\_prisoners.htm](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/aboutfysb/yes_prisoners.htm)

## Notes

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John Bridgeland, J.D.  
*Civic Enterprises*

Daniel J. Cardinali  
*Communities In Schools, Inc.*

David L. DuBois, Ph.D.  
*University of Illinois at Chicago*

John S. Gomperts, J.D.  
*Experience Corps*

Stephen F. Hamilton, Ed.D.  
*Cornell University*

Michael J. Karcher, Ed.D., Ph.D.  
*University of Texas at San Antonio*

Irv Katz  
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Thomas E. Keller, Ph.D.  
*Portland State University*

Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D.  
*Tufts University*

Belle Liang, Ph.D.  
*Boston College*

Thomas M. McKenna  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Nancy Rappaport, M.D.  
*Cambridge Health Alliance and  
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Jean E. Rhodes, Ph.D. (Chair)  
*University of Massachusetts in Boston*

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*Boston University*

Linda M. Stewart  
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## MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership

Project Director:

Cindy Sturtevant Borden

Project Staff:

Bruce Holmes

Victoria Tilney McDonough

Christian Rummell

Tonya Wiley

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MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its longstanding tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. Grants support health, education, civic, and cultural programs.



MENTOR is leading the national movement to connect young Americans to the power of mentoring. As a national advocate and expert resource for mentoring, in concert with a nationwide network of state and local *Mentoring Partnerships*, MENTOR delivers the research, policy recommendations, and practical performance tools needed to help make quality mentoring a reality for more of America's youth.

**MetLife Foundation**



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MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership | 1600 Duke Street, Suite 300 | Alexandria, VA 22314  
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