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## Strengthening Parent-Child Relationships: Visit Coaching with Children and Their Incarcerated Parents

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Visits between children and their incarcerated parents can be designed to safeguard child well-being, promote a positive identity for a child, and provide continuity of the parent-child relationship or support the beginning of a relationship. This chapter describes visit coaching, an innovative approach to visiting between children and their incarcerated parents, and the therapeutic value of family centers located within prison and jail visiting rooms. Visit coaching and family centers in prisons and jails offer an attachment-based, culturally competent developmental framework to help incarcerated parents and children's caregivers better understand and meet the needs of their children and manage the uncertainties about the future due to incarceration, and to support children in navigating their relationship with their incarcerated parent.

The incarceration of a parent during childhood can have long-lasting effects on self-perception and behaviors that put children at risk (Felitti et. al., 1998). Each risk factor a child is exposed to exponentially increases his or her odds of developing emotional and behavioral difficulties, including withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, substance abuse, sexual risk taking, and delinquency. Although many children overcome these odds and demonstrate remarkable resiliency, children of incarcerated parents are exposed to a greater total number of risks—parental separation, poverty, mental illness, parental substance abuse, and domestic violence—than other

children (Phillips & Gleeson, 2007). Tragically, children of incarcerated parents may end up incarcerated themselves. The isolation children with a parent in prison feel and their lack of access to their parents, rather than “the apple not falling far from the tree,” explains the increased risk these children face for negative outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the risks children face as a result of their parent’s incarceration are linked to being unable visit their parent, or when visits are afforded, are linked to the conditions under which the visits must take place. Although each child is affected differently by separation from a parent, three effects of having an incarcerated parent are commonly seen in children. The first is worrying, which may delay the child’s development. While other children are progressing in school and social development, the child of an incarcerated parent may be distracted by worrying about their parents’ safety and the uncertainty of their parent’s return. This worrying is made worse by the child’s exposure to media images of the dangers of prisons and jails. Even telephone calls may not mitigate these concerns, as children often need to see for themselves that their parents are being fed and cared for and are not being victimized in jail or prison.

Second, children of incarcerated parents often regress. Regression is a common consequence of trauma, with children’s developmental progress halting or sliding backward on developmental steps they were in the process of mastering. For example, young children who have been toilet trained may regress to the diaper stage. For older children, it has been hypothesized that they unconsciously delay milestones until their parent comes home, wishing not to commemorate birthdays, graduations, marriage, and other significant life events without sharing it with their parent. Although not all milestones can be celebrated in jail or prison, visits can go a long way toward helping children enjoy birthdays and other occasions with their incarcerated parent.

Third, children of incarcerated parents are often pushed into adult roles. “Parentification” of children may begin before the parent is incarcerated as a result of substance abuse or being overwhelmed by financial and/or relationship problems. Because of worries and responsibilities they are too young to cope with, these children may be more vulnerable to early problems with substances, school failure, and sexuality. Visiting room regulations exacerbate parentification by reversing the roles between child and incarcerated parent. For example, incarcerated individuals are not allowed to touch money, purchase items from vending

children are allowed to do these activities, the prison visiting rules require a role reversal between parent and child.

Supportive visiting programs for children of incarcerated parents and family centers inside prison and jail visiting rooms can mitigate these and other negative effects of parental incarceration on children.<sup>3</sup> Programs such as the Bedford Hills Teen and Summer Visiting Programs, New York City child welfare agency’s Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, Hour Children’s visiting programs, the Osborne Association’s Family Ties and FamilyWorks programs, and others around the country support children and their incarcerated parents to have more child-focused, age-appropriate, happier visits and strengthened relationships that benefit the child’s development while the parent is in jail or prison, as well as easing the return to the community.

How these programs are designed and offered is as important as what the programs are. A program’s underlying beliefs and philosophy will impact its effectiveness. For this reason, the authors want to say a word about language. This article intentionally uses the words “visiting” and “visits,” not “visitation,” to describe the time that children and their incarcerated parents have together. After decades of working with families in various situations of separation, the authors believe the term “visitation” conveys a legal, formal situation that visit coaching and family centers in jails and prisons are designed to purposely avoid. This has been confirmed for us by children who have told us, “Normal people don’t have visitations. They go to visit Grandma or Dad or Uncle.” In keeping with feedback from families and the philosophy behind visit coaching and family centers, we believe this shift in language is not merely semantic, but critical to supporting children and their incarcerated parents.

Similarly, it is important to be mindful of the language we use to refer to children’s incarcerated parents. Terms that appear frequently in the media such as “inmate,” “convict,” “offender,” and “criminal” are stigmatizing for children who are struggling to figure out who their parent is, to reconcile their complex and often conflicting feelings about the parent, and by association, about themselves. Although with respect to their unlawful behavior, society has designated them as “offenders” and the prison system calls them “inmates,” but to their children they are still “Mom” and “Dad,” and it is important to honor this relationship and the children’s experiences, attachment, and feelings. Saying “Mom,” “Dad,” “parent who is incarcerated,” or a “formerly incarcerated person” is more helpful to children (Ellis, 1994).

This chapter consists of six sections. The first section introduces visiting as an under-utilized therapeutic intervention for children of incarcerated parents. The second section summarizes the challenges of visiting in a correctional setting. The third section presents the attachment and other developmental needs of young children and teenagers who visit their incarcerated parents. In the next two sections, the effectiveness of visit coaching with children and teenagers and their incarcerated parents, and of family centers in jails and prisons is described in detail. The last section provides guidance for implementing visit coaching and family centers in jails and prisons.

### **VISITING AS AN UNDER-UTILIZED THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS**

When children do not live with a parent, visits are essential to maintain their relationship. Visiting as a consequence of parent-child separation is seen as routine in the context of divorce, but less so in the aftermath of a parent's incarceration. The negative assumptions about a parent by virtue of their incarceration often interfere with professionals and others viewing the situation from a child's perspective and a developmental, attachment lens. In addition to the benefits of visiting for children separated from a parent for other reasons, when a parent is incarcerated, visits also allay a child's worries about their parent and can help address the child's feeling of being stigmatized.

The benefits children derive from visiting their incarcerated parent vary depending upon the child's developmental stage, individual family circumstances, and the child's prior relationship with his or her parent. For example, for infants and young children, visits build their attachment to their parent and are essential to establishing a relationship. At this young age, phone calls or letters are not enough to solidify a relationship. For elementary school children, visits make them feel loved, answer questions about the parent's absence and safety, and can also dispel self-blame the child may be burdened with. For teenagers, visits help in their complex process of developing a positive identity and resolving anger and disappointment they feel toward their incarcerated parent.

Visits can be important and valuable whether or not the child lived with the parent prior to incarceration. An assumption is often made that because children with an incarcerated father (less frequently with an

incarcerated mother) may not have resided with their parent prior to the parent's incarceration, there was no parent-child relationship worth sustaining or strengthening. Reports from children who have been kept from seeing their parent in prison coupled with descriptions from those who have visited their incarcerated parents attest to the importance of making these child-parent relationships possible. As they get older, children will define their family relationships based on their experiences, and not having been totally separated from a parent—and having opportunities to create memories through visits—will be beneficial. For this reason, visits can be important even if the child and parent have been estranged.

For incarcerated parents, visits with their children are also important. Visits provide opportunities to demonstrate their love for their children, give their children a sense of belonging, be a positive model for their children, explain to their children choices they regret that resulted in incarceration, and participate in their child's education and development. In some prisons and fewer jails, incarcerated parents have completed parenting and other classes that promote self-awareness and growth while in prison and provide the information, motivation, and skills to be outstanding parents to their children despite their limiting circumstances and past behavior. If their children are in foster care, visits are crucial to incarcerated parents retaining parental rights.

Without visit support, incarcerated parents may not know how to prepare for visits and may have difficulty managing their own feelings or responding to the varied needs of their children when they see them. Without support before and after the visit, children may feel confused and rejected despite the incarcerated parent's intention to be loving and build the child's confidence in their relationship. Without support, the caregiver may not know how to help prepare the child or how to interpret and handle the child's reactions to the visit afterwards. If siblings live in different homes but come to the same visit as a family, this can add to the complexity of the situation for the children and their incarcerated parent, as well as the caregivers.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the uncertainties surrounding the next visit and the parent's return to the community can also undermine visits.

Visit coaching provides critical before and after support for all involved with the visit. It is an effective model for maintaining relationships through separation, rebuilding relationships, and for establishing relationships between parents and children who have been estranged.

## CHALLENGES OF VISITING IN A CORRECTIONAL SETTING

In contrast to visits between noncustodial parents and their children in the community, visits in jails and prisons present many obstacles to positive interaction. Distance, transportation challenges and cost, facility rules, and concerns of caretakers can all result in infrequent contact, which increases the guilt of the incarcerated parent and makes maintaining the parent-child connection more difficult.

A significant obstacle to visits with incarcerated parents, whether the child is living with a relative or in foster care, is the commonly held view that going to a jail or prison is harmful for the child, and/or seeing a parent whose release date is uncertain would be upsetting to the child. This view may prevent family members, caseworkers, and foster parents from telling children the truth about where their parent is. It is not uncommon for children to be told their parent is at college, away working, in the military, or in the hospital. Although motivated by protective intentions, these lies are often exposed and damage children's trust in their caregivers more than they serve to protect them. Most children eventually discover that their parent is incarcerated, and whether this is immediately or years later, uncovering the lie they were told has greater negative consequences than had they been told the truth. Children may not have the same negative associations with incarceration as adults do; the truth gives them a reality to come to terms with and maintains their trust in those they rely on for their care.

Furthermore, an incarcerated parent's extended absence can affect permanency for the child, but keeping the child and incarcerated parent from visiting is likely to be harmful and is not reasonable, even given the desire of relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers to have stable living arrangements for the child.

Once children know where their parent is and visits are considered, adults may worry about the hardship of a long trip to the prison or jail and the impact on the child of entering the facility through razor wire, metal detectors, and guards who may look like police officers. But children's responses are primarily determined by adult reactions. If the adult behaves as if the visit is an adventure and a wonderful reunion, the child is much less likely to be upset than if the adult's body language and words convey anger, shame, being inconvenienced, and negative views of the prison surroundings. It is crucial for relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers to have support to remember the importance of visits for the child in maintaining their relationship with the incarcerated parent,

even though the visit may also stir up feelings in the child that their caretaker will have to manage.

Another major obstacle to visits with incarcerated parents is distance and transportation. Correctional policies in most states do not take into consideration proximity to children and family in prison assignment decisions; incarcerated parents are frequently transferred to different prisons without prior notice. It is not easy for families to arrange affordable transportation to facilities that are miles away, often in hard-to-reach rural areas. Many families do not have cars and rely on public transportation that does not go to places many prisons are located. Cabs, trains, buses, and airplanes are too expensive for some families. If a caregiver has to pay for transportation per child, they may leave some or all of the children at home. Many foster care systems have not made provisions for paying for transportation by caseworkers or foster parents to jails and prisons. In most households where there is more than one child, managing school, medical care, religious life, daily chores, and recreation is so time-consuming that taking a half or full day or more for a visit to a distant jail or prison seems inconceivable.

Another deterrent to visits is the embarrassment of many adult family members about having a relative in prison. They may be concerned that they will be seen at the prison by people from their community or workplace. The demeaning process of entering the prison may exacerbate their shame. Both to avoid their embarrassment and protect the child, family members may avoid visiting and may be encouraged to do so by the incarcerated parent, who wants to spare their loved ones the shame. The fear of outstanding warrants for child support or unresolved criminal matters or worries about deportation may also keep family members from visiting, and they may not know how to find out the facility's rules for arranging for another adult to take the child to visit.

Correctional facilities were not set up with children in mind. The fact that most incarcerated people in the United States are also parents (close to 80% of incarcerated women and 66% of incarcerated men are parents) is not reflected in the regulations that govern jails and prisons, including their visiting rooms. This poses challenges for incarcerated parents and others trying to arrange and support positive visits. Every prison has its own set of complicated visit regulations and schedules; although some have certain rules in common, there are enough variations between facilities (even in the same state) that many families have experienced traveling long distances only to be turned away because of their clothing, insufficient ID, arriving on the wrong day, or for other

reasons. Especially if family members do not have access to online information, it can be difficult to get the correct telephone number for the facility and to ascertain when visits can occur, what age and how many children are permitted, what documents must be brought to the visit, and what cannot be brought to the visit. Visiting days and hours may vary from facility to facility, even within the same state, and some facilities only offer alternate weekends for visiting based on the first letter of the last name.<sup>5</sup> Having to arrive at the right entry, arriving at the right time, waiting in lines, and being put off by what may be perceived as an unwelcoming attitude by prison staff can also make a relative or foster care worker avoid taking the child to visit their incarcerated parent.

Upon arriving at a prison or jail for a visit, long waits to be “processed” (often outside in inclement weather with no awning or chairs) and poor visiting environments lacking toys and books for children and offering little privacy can result in the parent and children being at their worst during the visit. Relatives may be upset to find themselves visiting with a shackled parent. If the visit is a non-contact visit (common in most jails and many prisons across the country) and has to occur through glass or a wire/gated divider, both the parent and the child may be frustrated by the lack of physical contact and the inadequacy of a telephone for communicating. For young children in particular, these visits may be confusing if they see their own reflection in the glass and difficult because touch and proximity are critical for them to maintain their relationship. The message conveyed by such visits is that their parent is dangerous and is caged like an animal.

Many of the rules within a prison or jail visiting room are also counter to the ways children and families spend time together. For example, sometimes visiting children get to know one another and want to interact during their visits or have their parents meet. In most prisons, this is referred to as “cross-visiting” and is prohibited. Prison rules also ban incarcerated parents from changing their babies’ diapers or taking their children to the bathroom, which can be confusing to explain to a young child. Additionally, in visiting rooms that do not have family or children’s centers (designated child-friendly play areas), there is often nothing for children to do or anywhere for them to go, and often their caretakers are not permitted to bring even small toys or markers and paper into the visit to entertain them. Children may be required to sit still in adult size metal chairs for long periods of time. Sitting on their incarcerated parent’s lap may not be permitted. These are not developmentally-sound expectations and can make the visit an upsetting or

frustrating struggle for everyone involved. As a result, the family, parent, and correctional staff may come to the conclusion that visits are not good for children, when in fact it is the inflexible visit rules that are not child-friendly. Visit coaching and family centers are designed to support the parent-child relationship in part by modifying the correctional visiting environment.

Furthermore, older children and teenagers may think visits to a distant prison or jail are too time consuming because they have their own busy lives. They may say they are reluctant to visit or their interest in visiting may be masked by anger at their incarcerated parent. Instead of accepting these ideas at face value or labeling them as teenage “resistance,” it is important for adults to discuss the pros and cons of visiting their incarcerated parent with the teenager and come up with visit arrangements (and phone calls and letters to supplement infrequent visits) that respond to the teenager and also meet his or her long-term needs.

Suzanne, a 14-year-old girl in foster care, was asked by her caseworker if she wanted to visit her incarcerated mother over the coming weekend. She said “No,” and the conversation went no further. The caseworker was relieved, as she found the visits to the prison exhausting and upsetting. She did not ask why Suzanne said “No” (which was because on that weekend there was a big party for which she and her friends had been preparing). The caseworker also took this “No” as indicative of Suzanne’s future interest in visiting and did not ask again for months. Suzanne wanted to visit her Mom to tell her about the party and catch her up on school and friends, but thought she was only allowed to go when the caseworker brought it up and made arrangements.

Older children or teenagers may be angry or feel awkward visiting with their parent. They may not know what to say or may be afraid of their emotions (anger, rage, sadness, fear). In these situations, a visit coach who functions as a mediator can be helpful, and can point out to adults concerned about the visit that not all valuable contact between a teenager and their incarcerated parent is in the form of “easy visits.” Supported visits have therapeutic value for older children and teens, including in situations where the parent and child have been estranged.

Teenagers may want to visit their incarcerated parent, but not know how to set up a visit if their caretaker objects or is unable to accompany them. Although some prisons allow children age 16 and older to visit their parent unaccompanied, or outside organizations may be willing

to accompany the child for a visit, many caregivers and teenagers do not know this and it can be difficult to navigate the criminal justice system to discover such information. Even when teenagers can visit unescorted, in many instances they benefit from a visit coach or someone to support them and help them process their feelings before and after the visit.

If children are living with family members, the relationship of the caretaker and the incarcerated parent is a key to visit frequency and satisfaction. If the relative has a positive relationship with the incarcerated parent, they may be much more motivated to bring the child to a jail or prison visit. When children are brought to the visit by an adult with whom the incarcerated parent has a relationship, the nature of the relationship will affect how the parent relates to the children—if the adult is a loved one, the incarcerated parent may be torn over how to divide the visit's precious time; if there is friction between the adult and the incarcerated parent, the visit may be tense or awkward; if the adult is a representative of a foster care agency, the incarcerated parent may have many questions that take up time in the visit. If the child is living with a relative or in a foster home where the incarcerated parent is viewed as a negative influence on the child, the incarcerated parent may be preoccupied by fears the child has been "poisoned" against them. Incarcerated parents may require special support to manage visits with children who are accompanied by relatives who are hostile to them.

If the children are in foster care, visits in jails or prisons can occur through special programs, individual case workers, or the foster parents. Many foster care systems are overwhelmed arranging visits for parents and children in the community and do not have visiting programs for incarcerated parents. Many case workers and foster parents are not trained about the importance of children visiting with their incarcerated parents or provided with guidance for how to arrange such visits. They may believe that until it is certain when the parent will return to the community, it is pointless to "get the child's hopes up" by having a visit. Even when caseworkers and/or foster parents want to support the parent-child relationship, visits may simply seem too challenging and time-consuming given the distance, process, perceptions of prisons and prisoners, and sometimes previous negative experiences.

Correctional Officers assigned to visiting rooms rarely receive training to address these difficult issues. Their priorities and training are in the areas of security, safety, and custody. They are trained to view visitors as potential contraband carriers, including infants. The absence of training about family dynamics, child and youth development, and the

attachment needs of children may increase the tension during visits, as officers may misread a family's actions, particularly affection.

## **THE ATTACHMENT AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS VISITING INCARCERATED PARENTS**

The trauma of separation from a parent can cause disturbances of emotional regulation, social relationships, attachment, and communication. This may be made worse if the child has experienced other significant losses, abuse, or exposure to violence. Trauma typically slows down development in children and can interfere with all aspects of the child's functioning. Traumatized children often have trouble concentrating in school, are fearful, and may seem emotionally detached. Children who have been separated from their parent often blame themselves and may have trouble forming other relationships. Children need their parents to protect them from harm as well as to ensure a relationship through which they can learn to regulate themselves and form other relationships. Children also look to their parents to teach them values and interpret the world for them. As a result, when the parent and child are separated for long periods, this can be a far more significant loss than for an adult.

"Exposure to trauma . . . interferes with children's normal development of trust and later exploratory behaviors that lead to the development of autonomy" (Osofsky, 2004, pp. 5–6). Disrupted attachment has been linked to irritability, protest, search for missing parents, clinginess to caregivers, diminished appetite or food hoarding, disrupted sleep, and anger. Depending on a child's unique temperament, his or her response to loss can range from defiance to withdrawal. These reactions in the child may wear down the caregiver or foster parent, leading to their emotional withdrawal when the child desperately needs their attentiveness to develop trust.

Reactions to loss, and especially the unique loss of having a parent incarcerated, may significantly interfere with the child's life, although the symptoms of most children of incarcerated parents do not meet the current criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The particular nature of children's loss of parents to incarceration—with its stigma, ambiguity, and lack of social support—is also unfortunately little studied and not well understood. Even if they are in a loving home with a relative or foster parent, many children separated from their incarcerated parent

need, but do not receive, trauma treatment to support a return to normal development and reduce the likely continuing effects of disrupted attachment, especially fears of abandonment, trust issues, and problems with depression and aggression. The incarcerated parent, families, and foster families also require and often do not receive guidance in responding to children suffering loss.

The child's caregiver and the child's incarcerated parent may overlook the child's feelings because they think the child is too young to be reacting to loss. The incarcerated parent may have so much grief and guilt about not being close to the child that he/she has difficulty being sensitive and responsive to the child. They may have their own trust issues and may not really understand their child's needs. They may minimize the child's feelings because they believe this is the way to teach the child how to be tough to survive in a difficult world. They may simply not know how to respond to their child, and feeling frustrated and helpless, they may shut down.

A further complication incarcerated parents may have is responding to their child's chronological age and/or physical size, rather than understanding their child's attachment and other developmental needs. As discussed above, children with an incarcerated parent may be lagging developmentally or may take on adult roles. Children may appear to be grown, particularly those who move quickly into adult clothing, makeup, and tattoos. The parent may have unrealistic expectations for their children.

Ms. C is a 23-year-old mother serving a three-year sentence after a drug bust in her apartment. Her mother is caring for her 2-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter, and brought them to visit in prison. This was the first time they had seen their mother in months. Her son sat quietly on his grandmother's lap sucking on a bottle, not making eye contact with his mother, and appeared not to recognize her. Her daughter clung to Ms. C, but when she started doing her daughter's hair, the little girl lashed out at her, crying and asking why she never came home. Ms. C's mother has health problems and looked more worn-out than when they saw each other in court, and Ms. C wished they had more privacy and time for her to show concern for her. At the end of the visit, Ms. C was full of regrets, feeling rejected by her son and awful when her daughter had to be pulled away from her, pleading for her to come home.

No one prepared either Ms. C or her mother for the children's responses to separation from their mother, which could have been predicted given their ages and temperament. Had Ms. C been helped to anticipate their reactions, she would have taken them less personally and

been able to respond to her 2-year-old's need for reassurance and her 4-year-old's need for affection and simple explanations of her absence. Both her 2- and 4-year-old also had attachment needs that had to be met in different ways, without Ms. C feeling overwhelmed with sadness that she had to rebuild their relationships. Both children needed to play with their mother, but understandably she got distracted by the 2-year-old's regressed behavior and the 4-year-old's protests; there were no toys or books available to make play easier, nor photographs to provide the children with something concrete and lasting from their mother to take away with them. Preparation and more contact through telephone calls and letters might also have helped Ms. C express compassion for her mother without taking too much time from the visit with the children. Having a visit coach help Ms. C prepare for all of this and help their grandmother support the children would have enhanced their visits.

Teenagers also have attachment and other developmental needs that are difficult for their incarcerated parents to meet during visits. The teenager's love, anger, and uncertainty about their relationship may be hard to decipher because of typical adolescent immature thinking and identity. The teenager may say things without thinking or may minimize his or her risk-taking when the parent inquires about friends, school attendance, or substance use. The parent may worry that the teenager's clothes, hair, or piercings indicate an undesirable identity rather than experimentation. Without preparation, the incarcerated parent may express disapproval rather than support, interest, and praise for the teenager. Wanting to be parental, the parent may anger the teen by giving advice or making punitive comments, which often escalates into an argument as the teenager questions the parent's right to play this role after having abandoned him or her.

Mr. S is a 30-year-old father who has been incarcerated for 12 years for his involvement at age 17 with a group of friends who severely injured another teenager in a fight. His son, a baby when Mr. S was arrested, is now 14 years old and has been raised by his mother and maternal grandmother. They were angry at Mr. S, had limited transportation, and did not bring his son to the prison more than 100 miles away from where they lived. Over the years, Mr. S wrote letters to his son, which were not answered, and he was not sure they lived at the same address or whether his son got the letters. Mr. S says he has grown up in prison and he is proud of his accomplishments, completing a GED program, becoming a respected leader, and serving as the chaplain's assistant for years. Mr. S has been moved to a prison closer to home, and hopes to be released in the next 18 months. Mr. S's younger

brother is now visiting more, and agreed to contact his son's mother to get permission to bring him on some visits. Mr. S gave a picture of himself and a letter for his son to his brother. He cried when he received his son's picture and a description of his son's school progress and home life.

It is commendable that Mr. S worked so hard to arrange contact with his son. But it is apparent that a visit of a 14-year-old with a father he has not seen since infancy presents many challenges. Mr. S was nervous about the visit, believing his son knew nothing about him except his offense and criticism from his mother and grandmother. He wanted the visit to be the beginning of a wonderful father-son relationship. He hoped he would get released, get a job, begin to support his son, and provide a home for him. He worried because his brother told him his son's grades had been going down, he lived in a high-crime neighborhood with a lot of gangs, and he had not been brought up in the church. He did not know what his son's feelings were about him. Mr. S needed support in separating his ambitious hopes for visits from his son's needs, to figure out how he would respond to his son's views about having a father who loves him and his anger about his father's absence, to spend most of the visit showing an interest in his son's life, and to avoid criticizing his son (or his mother) or putting too much pressure on him to move quickly into a new, close relationship. Having a visit coach help Mr. S prepare and support his son would greatly increase the likelihood of this significant first visit, and those that followed, being a mutually positive experience.

### THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VISIT COACHING WITH CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS AND THEIR INCARCERATED PARENT

Visit coaching is an exciting innovation in family visits with children who are separated from their parent. The visit coach actively supports the incarcerated parent to meet their children's unique needs and capitalize on their strengths as a family.

Visit coaching includes

- helping incarcerated parents identify and prepare for their children's feelings and behaviors in visits.
- supporting incarcerated parents to take charge of their visits and plan specifically how they will meet their children's needs.

- helping incarcerated parents identify their strengths in responding to each of their children and their unique relationship despite their separation.
- assisting incarcerated parents in coping with their feelings in order to keep their guilt, sadness, anger, helplessness, and ambivalent or negative relationships with the child's caregiver from undermining positive visits with their children.
- supporting children before and after their visits with their incarcerated parents.
- facilitating co-parenting by helping incarcerated parents, relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers have a shared view of each child's needs and improving communication among these figures in a child's life.

Visit coaching is a valuable service for incarcerated parents because it is a hands-on approach applied directly to their children. Although parenting classes can also address techniques for meeting children's needs and bolster a parent's skills and understanding of their children, visit coaching is more individualized and brings a specific set of strengths-based, child-focused, parent empowerment values to its practice. The two approaches can work together, but unfortunately, parenting classes remain rare in correctional facilities.

Incarcerated parents appreciate having a visit coach provide encouragement before, after, and ideally during visits to build on what they already know. Visit coaches intentionally support parents' own approaches to meeting the unique needs of their children—rather than directing

Table 8.1

#### BENEFITS OF VISIT COACHING IN JAILS & PRISONS

- Visit coaching is based on a belief that incarcerated parents can overcome sadness, guilt, and other obstacles to make visits happy for their children.
- Visit coaching is an important way to reduce the effects of loss and harm of separation on children.
- Visit coaching encourages the family's cultural preferences in commemorating milestones and other traditions.
- Through visit coaching, incarcerated parents practice the lifelong habit of asking "What does my child need?" and flexibly adjusting their parenting to meet those needs.

parenting, the coaching is culturally sensitive and builds on the incarcerated parent's strengths. A parent may have changed during the period of incarceration and become more able to appreciate his or her children's needs. Visit coaching is an opportunity for a parent to enlarge their repertoire of enjoyable ways to interact with their children. Visit coaches help incarcerated parents make peace with things they cannot change about their separation from their children so they can have fulfilling visits with them.

### **Empowering Incarcerated Parents to Plan Their Visits Builds on Their Strengths**

Although the regulations of the prison or jail and the unchangeable reality of separation are the framework for visits, it is important for incarcerated parents to view the visit as an experience they can take charge of. The visit coach guides the parent while appreciating the unique ways parents show love for their children. Parents are encouraged to make visits a celebration of the family by doing things they enjoy (both activities from the past and new ones the child is interested in), as well as taking pictures, making a family scrapbook, continuing or creating family rituals, and telling family stories.

Parents are helped to manage competition between the children for the parent's attention in visits. Coaches encourage parents to spend a little special individual time with each child during every visit. Each child has unique needs, and coaches help parents stand in each child's shoes and not take their children's negative behavior personally. By confirming that meeting their children's needs can be frustrating and exhausting, the visit coach gives the parent valuable support.

### **Visit Coaching to Respond to Children's Reactions**

Separation from their incarcerated parents causes a range of feelings and behaviors in children. It is not surprising that many incarcerated parents comment on how different the children seem from when they last saw them. Children who are separated from their parents may be irritable, withdrawn, aggressive, sad, clingy, and emotionally demanding; some show fearfulness and anxiety and have difficulty accepting comforting; others may seek attention and warmth from just about anyone. These behaviors can occur during visits and/or in the child's home and at school. A child's living situation and the degree of support they receive

regarding their parent's incarceration significantly impacts a child's response to the separation.

It is normal for a child separated from a parent to have reactions to visits, which are usually not a sign that the visit is harmful or that the prison/jail setting was too upsetting for the child. Incarcerated parents, relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers require support to respond lovingly to children's varied reactions to visits, including being (a) happy and relieved to see his/her incarcerated parent; (b) confused, especially about why the parent has been gone and cannot come home, and sometimes about having "two mommies" or "two daddies;" (c) sad, angry, and feeling out-of-control about being separated from his or her incarcerated parent; (d) guilty that the separation is his or her fault; and (e) worried about whether his or her incarcerated parent is okay. Most children (including older children and teenagers) do not put these feelings into words; instead, their behaviors reflect their feelings. Regression (being babyish, whiney, or scared), numbing feelings, sadness, irritability, overactivity, physical pains, or problems falling asleep are common prior to, during, and following visits. It is not easy to care for a grieving or protesting child during visits. If the child continues to be aggressive or withdrawn, the frustrated parent must be supported not to get overwhelmed by guilt or a sense of powerlessness.

Coaching can relieve children from the painful pressures of choosing loyalties by helping the incarcerated parent and caregiver or foster parent encourage the child to be satisfied in the family he or she lives with while also maintaining a strong relationship with the parent from whom he or she is separated. Without being aware of it, well-intentioned family members and foster parents can contribute to the child's confusion about who to love, who is better, and what to do with negative feelings toward the incarcerated parent, relative, and/or foster parent. It is important not only for the relative or foster parent and incarcerated parent to communicate but for the child to see them interact in a friendly, collaborative way. When visit coaches and incarcerated parents include caregivers or foster parents and caseworkers in exchanges about the children's needs (via telephone and/or letter), everyone has a shared understanding of a child's difficult behaviors and can use the same approaches in managing them. These other adults can then also look for opportunities outside of and in between visits to say positive things about the parent that can affirm the child's positive sense of self.

## Supporting Incarcerated Parents to Have a Positive Attitude About Visiting

Visit coaching helps incarcerated parents not get discouraged about how much active parenting time they are missing. They often worry they are losing their children, and feel helpless and hopeless. When they visit with their children, parents may be overwhelmed by their mixed feelings of pleasure, grief, awkwardness, and defensiveness. Separating from their child at the end of the visit is painful. Even though they enjoy their children, visits make most parents feel sad, inadequate, and powerless. Coaches help make the pain of visits tolerable for incarcerated parents so they can remain focused on their children's needs.

Visits may flood parents with anger, sadness, and guilt about separation from their children. The parent benefits from the visit coach's validation of their complicated feelings about visits. But the visit coach's primary goal is to help the parent stand in the child's shoes. Coaches support them to put their own reactions aside in order to concentrate on meeting their child's needs during the visit.

Incarcerated parents are often embarrassed to greet their children wearing prison garb. They are uncomfortable being ordered around by correctional staff in front of their children and they worry about how their children are treated both as they enter the facility and during the visit. It is a very common occurrence to have children witness their incarcerated parent (and sometimes both parents) be chastised in front of them by a correctional officer. Coaches guide the incarcerated parent in addressing their concerns, which helps them relax and enables them to concentrate on their children's needs rather than their own worries.

## Supporting Incarcerated Parents to Plan Each Visit Around Their Children's Needs

The needs of very young children are different from the needs of elementary school children and teenagers. The needs of children with a strong attachment to their incarcerated parent are different from those without it. Within developmental stages, variations in temperament and coping strategies make every child unique. Although it might be tempting to skip the formal step of planning each visit around the specific needs of each child, it is the key to helping incarcerated parents have positive visits. Visit coaches support parents in attuning to children by emphasizing that reciprocal communication with children builds attachment. Actively

anticipating what specifically it would take to make each child happy during the visit may be difficult for incarcerated parents to do on their own. The lasting benefit of visit coaching is the parent saying to himself or herself as the child develops, often years after the initial separation, "What does my child need?"

With teenagers, visit coaches can help incarcerated parents build an enduring positive relationship. Teens are more likely to become successful, independent adults if they are helped to have stable connections. The initial goals of visit coaching with teenagers and their incarcerated parents are to help them enjoy something together and to improve their communication. Most teenagers need praise and positive regard from their parent more than anything else. The coach helps the incarcerated parent appreciate that it is important for the teenager not to feel rejected by the parent's decisions, not to blame himself or herself for the past, and to feel heard and listened to. Teens need to be able to feel safe in expressing their anger, fears, thoughts, dreams, and desires. Incarcerated parents are supported to understand that teenagers struggle with their need to have independence from their family while still feeling loved, accepted, and connected to their parent.

## Supporting Children Before and After Their Visits with Their Incarcerated Parents

Incarcerated parents and caregivers are guided by the visit coach in how to help children with their reactions to visits. The incarcerated parent is helped to write letters and have telephone calls that address the child's needs. Caregivers and foster parents are helped to support the child in writing or dictating letters or responding in telephone calls.

Visit coaches can also talk with children individually and/or convene support groups for children of incarcerated parents. Peer support groups where children learn that they are not the only child with an incarcerated parent and receive support for not feeling stigmatized by their parent's situation are important benefits of such groups. There are several examples nationally of such groups and their demonstrated positive effects on children, including the Girls Scouts Behind Bars program (operated in several states), Peanut Butter and Jelly Services' school-based support group (in Albuquerque, New Mexico), and the Osborne Association's Family Ties Program in New York (for more information, see their websites: [www.girlscouts.org/program](http://www.girlscouts.org/program); [www.pbjfamilyservices.org](http://www.pbjfamilyservices.org); and [www.osborneny.org](http://www.osborneny.org)).

## Supporting Positive Communication Among Incarcerated Parents, Caregivers, Foster Parents, and Caseworkers

Incarcerated parents, caregivers, and foster parents are guided by the visit coach to develop a shared view of each child's needs and recognize how important it is for them to co-parent successfully. The incarcerated parent is helped to write letters and have telephone conversations with caregivers to achieve this goal.

Depending on distances, visit coaches can also talk with caregivers and foster parents individually and/or convene support groups. The shared experience of a group trip to and from a prison or jail, and facilitated discussions during the ride, can help caregivers and foster parents support the relationship between the child and incarcerated parent. Visit coaches can convene conference calls between incarcerated parents and caregivers to discuss children's needs.

Visit coaching can also help the parent and child prepare for return to the community. Although release may be the moment all have been waiting for, it is also a very stressful time for children, parents, and caregivers. Parole hearings in particular are highly stressful for all, and if parole is denied, disappointment, anger, and sadness can affect visits, telephone calls, and letter writing. Helping parents, children, and their caregivers handle these emotions, as well as having realistic expectations when parents do return can happen through groups as well as during visits before release.

## The Effectiveness of Family Centers for Visiting in Jails and Prisons

Family centers embody similar values to visit coaching, aiming to provide a comfortable and child-friendly environment for children and families, which strengthens their relationships during incarceration. A number of correctional facilities across the country offer child-friendly opportunities for children to visit with their incarcerated parent in "children's" or "family" centers. One of the oldest and most well-established of these efforts are the Osborne Association Family Centers in five medium and maximum security correctional facilities for men in New York State. Osborne's family centers vary slightly in size and physical design based on available space and the size of the population at each of the facilities. However, all centers are rooms either inside or adjacent to the visiting

halls at the facilities. When walls are built to section off the center they are made out of plexiglass so security staff can monitor interactions in the center while remaining outside. Centers are outfitted with colorful decorations, often painted murals and posters that create a warm, inviting space for children of all ages. Specially shaped tables and different size plastic chairs along with books, toys, arts and crafts, and games are found in all centers. Family centers are open on weekends and holidays during the same hours the visiting halls are open and are staffed by professional staff and incarcerated staff who are graduates of Osborne's parenting program. The family centers are available to children under age 18, and activities are designed to encourage the strengthening of parent-child bonds, improve communications, and provide a forum for parents to help their children build skills from reading and math to creativity and the ability to cooperate and share.

Osborne Family Centers where children and their parents use the child-friendly visiting environment as an opportunity to strengthen their relationships is the most common model for these efforts, but other variations exist. One of these is the Project REACHH (Re-energizing Attachment, Communication, Health, and Happiness) program at the Shelby County Division of Corrections in Memphis, TN. The Project REACHH visiting program takes place on weekday evenings when regular visiting sessions are closed. Children are scheduled to come for specific visiting times. Another key difference between the Osborne Family Center approach and the Project REACHH model is that at Project REACHH visiting sessions only the children and their fathers are allowed to visit together. Caregivers stay in another room where they can talk to each other, receive informative presentations about resources and programs for their children, or just watch TV or read a magazine. The rationale behind the Project REACHH program design is that it affords an opportunity for the incarcerated parent to focus solely on their children and on honing their parenting skills. A program like Project REACHH works well in Memphis because almost everyone incarcerated at the facility comes from the local area, making it possible for caregivers to travel the (on average) less than 30-minute trip during the week to bring their children to see their fathers and still be willing to come out to a visit themselves at another time during the week.

The remarkable children's center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, set up by Sister Elaine Roulet and community volunteers and largely run by incarcerated mothers, has numerous child-friendly programs, funded by the Department of Corrections and

administered by Catholic Charities (this noteworthy model for prison visiting is not an Osborne Family Center). The well-equipped playroom is open every day of the year for visits. The children's center also has a summer camp where children spend each day with their mother and stay overnight in nearby volunteer host families. Special buses and volunteers provide transportation for the children, many of whom live an hour or more from the facility. The center also offers a Child Development Associate certificate for incarcerated women, involving course work and supervised work with children in the daycare center; parenting classes and a mother's support group have also been popular in the center.

## IMPLEMENTING VISIT COACHING AND FAMILY CENTERS IN JAILS AND PRISONS

### Visit Coaching

Implementing visit coaching has the following key components:

- Training for visit coaches in how to
  - 1 meet individually and in groups with incarcerated parents to help them identify their children's needs and how to meet them during the visit.
  - 2 meet individually and in groups with incarcerated parents to prepare them for their child's reactions during visits.
  - 3 support incarcerated parents immediately before, during, and after the visit to meet their children's needs and keep their own feelings from interfering with the visit; visit coaches must be prepared to resist directing visits or telling parents how to parent.
  - 4 help children prepare for the visit and debrief with them after the visit to help them process their emotions.
  - 5 support positive communication among incarcerated parents, caregivers, and foster parents and help relatives and foster parents respond to the children's needs before and after visits (including support for letter writing and telephone calls).
- Arranging for toys, books, art supplies, photo albums, a camera, children's music CDs, a portable CD player, snacks, and supplies for birthday parties to be accessible during coached visits in prisons or jails.

- Ongoing supervision for visit coaches.
- Discussions with corrections.

Visit coaches can be trained volunteers as well as a range of paid staff from a variety of organizations.

Ideally, visit coaching is implemented in partnership with a parenting class for incarcerated parents and a child development class or training for correctional officers, focusing on visiting. If these are not available, visit coaches could offer to launch or advise these efforts. Meetings with correctional administrators are important to discuss how visit coaching can reduce the negative impact of incarceration on children and help children and incarcerated parents during visits. Many of the rules that cause a negative visiting experience may never have been viewed from a child's perspective and once seen from the child's shoes, can be changed to implement visit coaching. Visit coaching will improve the visiting room for officers, who are often frustrated by restless or frustrated children running around, yanking at vending machines, or playing at the water fountain, and by parents who may appear passive or authoritarian. The visiting environment, misunderstanding of children's and parent's feelings underneath these behaviors, and the lack of preparation for incarcerated parents, children, caretakers, and correctional officers contribute to visit problems. When toys, books, or games for the children and visit coaching can be provided to the parent, combined with training for the officers, everyone is more satisfied and the child's needs are supported. Such supportive visits can also reduce disciplinary incidents within correctional settings as parents leave visits more satisfied and less frustrated.

### Family Centers

Although there are different models of family centers within jails and prisons, core components of effective centers include

- Collaboration between a community or faith-based organization and corrections. When corrections supports child-friendly visiting in principle, the next step is to determine the program design. To do this, the population to be served must be identified and facility capacities must be assessed. The largest cost associated

with family centers are the initial set-up expenses, which may include construction, refurbishing, and equipment; after this initial expenditure, family centers are relatively cost-effective to run, particularly when donations are solicited and local groups (churches, businesses, other) take an interest in supporting visiting children.

- Decisions about who operates the family center will determine staff costs. Programs may be staffed by professionals with a background in social work, education, counseling, recreation, or a related field, volunteers, incarcerated individuals (as is done in New York), and/or college interns (as is done in Memphis) or graduate students. In all instances, comprehensive training, including visit coaching training, should be provided for anyone working in the family center. An offer should be made to provide parenting classes for incarcerated parents at the family center and to provide training for correctional staff on child development and visiting.

When partnerships with corrections support visit coaching and family centers, visiting enhances children's well-being. This does not mean—and this is a frequently expressed concern—that children will view prison or jail as a “nice place” and want to grow up and go there. Even in the most supportive visiting situations, children are aware of the restrictions and punitive aspects of incarceration. Even when young children do not want to leave or say they want to stay with their parent at the end of a visit, it is their parent they do not want to leave, not the prison setting.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Visits strengthen the attachment between children and their incarcerated parent and reduce the child's worries. Visits help teenagers resolve anger and disappointment toward their incarcerated parent. However, distance, transportation challenges and cost, facility rules, and concerns of caretakers are obstacles to positive visits between children and their incarcerated parents. In addition, incarcerated parents and children's caretakers may not fully appreciate the impact of separation on children and teenagers, resulting in inadequate preparation for visits in jails and prisons. Visit coaching is designed to build on incarcerated parents'

strengths, help them identify their children's feelings, and support them to plan how they will meet their children's needs. Visit coaching assists incarcerated parents in coping with their feelings in order to keep their guilt, sadness, anger, helplessness, and ambivalent or negative relationships with the child's caregiver from undermining positive visits with their children. Visit coaching also supports children before and after their visits with their incarcerated parents and facilitates co-parenting by helping incarcerated parents, relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers have a shared view of each child's needs and improving communication among them. Family centers in jails and prisons provide an inviting space for children of all age with books, toys, arts and crafts, and games. Family centers encourage the strengthening of parent-child bonds, improve communication, and support incarcerated parents in actively parenting their children.

Despite their tragically large numbers, children of incarcerated parents remain largely invisible. A casualty of this invisibility is that their relationship with their incarcerated parent does not get supported and children suffer as a result. Visit coaching offers a unique opportunity to support this relationship and in doing so to promote the well-being of children and their healthy futures. Family centers similarly support these outcomes, ensuring that when the parent and children come together on a visit, they do so in a comfortable, developmentally-sound, sensitive environment with trained staff. Together, these child-centered, parent empowerment interventions—if replicated across the country—could go a long way toward safeguarding the futures of children of incarcerated parents.

## ENDNOTES

1. In 2000 while working at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS, New York City's child welfare agency), Tanya Krupat launched CHIPP (Children of Incarcerated Parents Program) to provide visits for children in foster care and their parents in jails and prisons in the most child-friendly visiting spaces possible. Ms. Krupat reached out to Marty Beyer, who ACS then hired to provide technical assistance and train staff in more than 25 private foster care agencies in New York City and CHIPP in visit coaching, using her manual published by ACS. Although still lacking research about its effectiveness, visit coaching has been recognized as a promising practice and is being implemented nationally. Randi Blumenthal-Guigui coordinated Memphis Children Locked Out, a community-wide initiative designed to assess and address the needs of Memphis-area children with a parent in prison. Ms. Guigui developed Project REACHH (Re-energizing Attachment, Communication, Health, and Happiness), an innovative visiting program for children in Memphis, Tennessee, whose parents were

incarcerated. Ms. Guigui was also a founding member of the Alliance for Tennessee's Children of Prisoners. Ms. Guigui and Ms. Krupat work at Osborne Association, a New York City-based nonprofit founded in 1931 with a 20-year history of providing innovative prison- and jail-based services to families, including in-prison family centers, parenting education programs, healthy relationships courses, and a visit program that reconnects incarcerated fathers with their children, as well as community services for individuals reentering the community and for their children and families. Osborne coordinates the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents to raise awareness about and reform policies and practices that impact the over 200,000 children in NY state whose parents are incarcerated. Ms. Krupat, Ms. Guigui, and Dr. Beyer are collaborating on Osborne's Therapeutic Visit Coaching demonstration project.

2. There is no genetic propensity toward incarceration or criminal involvement, and the statistic often cited that children of incarcerated parents are 5–6 times more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system has been refuted and has no basis in research (Hairston, 2007).
3. Although used interchangeably, jail and prison are distinct entities: a jail holds people charged but not convicted, as well as those with sentences usually of one year or less; a prison holds those convicted and serving longer sentences.
4. The term “caregivers” refers throughout to relatives and non-relatives taking care of children.
5. Because only a limited number of visitors may come at one time, facilities with small visiting rooms and large populations have restricted visit schedules; individuals previously released from prison or those who work in prison may not be allowed to visit or require special permission that is difficult to get.

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