

CHILDREN FEEL TOO

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“Ten years,” “Twenty-five years,” or “life,” are the words children must hear the judge say when sentencing their parents—words that will never be forgotten and will mark their lives for eternity. Most of the time we think about what an individual feels when they hear their sentences during their infamous last court date. But we tend to forget that their loved ones feel just as deeply as they do or more so. Their spouses, parents, and friends but most importantly their children. As a child, it is difficult to comprehend what is going on and why one of their parents was consequentially stripped from being in their everyday lives. At their young age, they suffer just like any human being does, but the problem lays with their inability to achieve proficiency of emotional intelligence. It is challenging for them to grasp and cope with a traumatic event like this one, especially if there is little to no professional guidance for the child. If not treated adequately, the child can mature into the wrong path whilst figuring out on their own how to fill in those empty spaces in their hearts and minds. The overall goal is to advocate for more schools and communities to establish programs that focus on children with incarcerated parents with their emotional, mental, and academic needs, especially in areas with low socioeconomic factors and high rates of intergenerational incarceration. The closest platforms to do so is at school and after-school programs where the children’s development mainly occurs.

Few schools and communities have managed to implement programs that focus on the mental and emotional development of children enduring the experience of their parent being incarcerated. Kids Cope Primary Prevention Services (KCPPS) is a group that focuses on connecting and stabilizing a relationship between a child and their incarcerated parent in California (Bowen, 2020). The methods in which this group strengthens the parent-child relationship is by providing an advocate to assist and guide the child through the many challenges they may face just by clicking an app and connecting them to their designated advocate. The advocate also provides the parent with their child’s academic performance and possibly finds a way for the incarcerated parent to participate in parent-student teacher conferences (Bowen, 2020). Groups like this have taken the initiative to work for the individuals most affected by hardships such as forced physical distance from loved ones.

Children who experience or witness their parent’s arrest are prone to have poor health conditions, academic regression, and negative everyday behavior (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2021). It is disheartening to see how children witness such an event without warning, not knowing what to do, where to go, or how to stay strong. Events like this mainly occur in areas with lower socioeconomic circumstances and can even seem as if it is a social norm. But that is where we need the focus. If one were to compare children from two different socioeconomic extremes, their upbringing will be drastically different in all aspects (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2021). Furthermore, the education and school systems in less fortunate areas are subpar. As much as a child may be affected emotionally, they are also affected academically. The quality of the school system in those areas are not the best due to “employing teachers with lower standards of education, nonstandard certification, and fewer years of teaching experience” (Haskins, 2017). Schools in those areas are more likely to have metal detectors, on-duty police officers, and higher rates of in-school aggression and violence (Haskins, 2017). Improper guidance and

societal influences are enough to drive the child or adolescent in the wrong direction. Ultimately, we do not want the children of the incarcerated to fall into the wrong hands leading to severe and legal consequences.

Many may say that a child following the same footsteps as their parents is inevitable, but is it? Putting a child in adequate and beneficial surroundings societally will influence their view on life while distinguishing what is right and what is wrong. Being surrounded by constant violence and negative influences will evidently affect their upbringing. Having a parent incarcerated is difficult enough because that parental figure is not present and can cause unhealed wounds their entire life if not treated appropriately. The sentence of their parent is also a determinant factor to their emotional and mental development. Say their parent is sentenced to 15 years of prison time—that will cover their child's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. Those years are prominent in the aspect of behavioral development as well. The possible lack of guidance to cope with such challenges can lead to other coping mechanisms like “substance abuse, academic failures, and externalizing behaviors” (Kjellstrand et al., 2018). It is a chain that is difficult to break but not impossible.

Parental incarceration is a traumatic experience that leaves a scar on both the child and the parent. As the years go by, there is often just a band-aid covering the wound, there is nothing to actually heal it. That is where we need the help and the focus to be placed on: The children who do not have access to high-end professionals and programs that help them understand and control their emotions and decisions due to them living and studying in areas with lower socioeconomic factors. We need all school systems and local governments to take that initiative in making an effort to implement those resources for children who are in definite need. It takes empathy, effort, and desire. It is time to focus on them and their futures, as they are they are the next generation to make changes and a difference in this world. We all need to validate their emotions and allow them to understand that it is okay to feel happiness and sadness. Listening and being empathetic can make a difference. The life of children will be influenced by whatever power guides them, and it is our responsibility to break those chains to validate and guide them.

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