

Tips to Support Children When a Parent is in Prison

By: *Rosemary Martoma, MD, FAAP*

More than 2.7 million (1 in 28 (<https://www.kidsmates.org/demographics>)) children in the United States currently have a parent who is in jail or prison. These children often face a lot of stress, including emotional, physical, academic, and financial hardships. Many children choose not to talk about their stress because they worry that the stigma of having an incarcerated parent will make things worse.



The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes having a parent in prison as an adverse childhood experience (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/ACEs-Adverse-Childhood-Experiences.aspx>), a childhood trauma that can lead to poor health and wellbeing as an adult. Some children may also witness their parent's arrest and other stressful events beyond incarceration, such as a trial and sentencing. Yet, these children can thrive if they build resilience (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/default.aspx>).

Be an anchor of support

Resilient children commonly have at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult. Guidance and advice from supportive adults can help children develop skills to survive the trauma of their parent going to prison.

Keep open communication

Children of incarcerated parents will almost certainly ask hard questions and experience difficult situations, such as bullying and discrimination. A child's parent, guardian or other caregiver won't be able to answer every question or solve every problem. However, they can promote resilience by keeping an open line of communication.

Here are some suggestions from the C.A.R.E.S. (<https://www.kidsmates.org/survival-skills>) approach to help support resilience:

- **C**reate a safe environment for the child to talk freely.
- **A**cknowledge and validate the child's concerns.
- **R**eassure the child that they are not alone.
- **E**ncourage active play (</English/ages-stages/toddler/fitness/Pages/Caution-Children-at-Play.aspx>) and skill building.
- **S**hare honest and age-appropriate information with the child.

Prioritize stability

Children often have to cope with big losses when a parent is imprisoned. They may lose a caregiver, their home, their and their friends. Caregivers can help ease the trauma by trying to keep the child's situation as stable as possible. Setting up routines (</English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Parenting-in-a-Pandemic.aspx>) can

help. When this isn't possible, it is best to stagger changes, so that children don't feel as if they have "lost everything" at once. [Back to Top](#)

Encourage active skill building

Children build resilience through academic, athletic, cultural, or other challenging activities. These activities teach children to develop problem-solving skills in a fun setting. For example, playing team sports can help a child develop friendships or find a coach who could be a supportive adult. Children who learn an instrument can build skills that help channel frustrations.

Involve other supportive adults

When a child's parent is incarcerated, it is common for caregiver to feel overwhelmed (</English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Feeling-Overwhelmed-with-Parenting-Demands.aspx>) with new responsibilities. Asking other trusted adults for help may improve the situation for both caregiver and child.

A wider network of supportive adults can also help children of incarcerated parents continue to build resilience. Examples of other supportive adults include extended family members, teachers, coaches, neighbors and members of their religious community.

Supportive adults hold a position of trust. They should not risk harming that trust by asking or researching details about the child's imprisoned parent. Instead, they should focus on understanding how best to support the child. For example, a teacher can create a safe and supportive learning environment in the classroom, a family member can plan a fun outing with the child, and a neighbor can offer to pick up the child after school.

Consider helping the child connect with their incarcerated parent

Most children want to stay connected with their incarcerated parent. If the relationship is a healthy one for the child, an incarcerated parent can still act as a supportive adult. Keeping in contact can reduce a child's sense of loss and can help provide stability.

There may be barriers to communicating with a family member who is incarcerated, but families can write, call, email, and participate in video visits. Families can also remember and plan creative ways to celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays, graduations, and other important milestones that include the incarcerated parent.

Look into programs that can help

Primary caregivers should evaluate whether they are eligible for social welfare assistance. Programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid, or housing assistance can significantly reduce financial burdens.

There are also a number of community programs specifically designed to support children of incarcerated parents (<https://www.instagram.com/kidsmates/>). These programs offer a variety of services, from mentorship to counseling and therapy. Caregivers can talk to a child's pediatrician to identify local resources in their community.

More Information

- ACES – Adverse Childhood Experiences (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/ACEs-Adverse-Childhood-Experiences.aspx>)
- Building Resilience (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/default.aspx>)
- Children of Incarcerated Parents (<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents>) (Youth.gov)
- Developing Resilience in the Face of Parental Incarceration (<https://www.kidsmates.org/>) (KidsMates.org)
- Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration (<https://nicic.gov/little-children-big-challenges-incarceration>)

About Dr. Martoma

Dr. Mary Martoma, MBChB, MD, FAAP is a practicing pediatrician, criminal justice reform advocate, and president of KidsMates Inc., a national nonprofit organization. Dr. Martoma trained in New Zealand and America and regularly speaks before national audiences on proven techniques for developing resilience in children. Her work at KidsMates



Inc. (www.kidsmates.org (<https://www.kidsmates.org/>)) focuses on empowering children of incarcerated parents. [Back to Top](#)

Last Updated 7/1/2020

Source American Academy of Pediatrics (Copyright © 2020)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.