



# CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS PARTNERSHIP:

## Serving Children and Their Caregivers

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**If a visitor were to walk into the women's or men's parenting classes at the Frederick County Adult Detention Center (FCADC), they would hear rich and spirited conversations with incarcerated participants actively engaged. One inmate doesn't know how to help her mother when she calls to say the inmate's 7-year-old daughter is wetting the bed at night again. Another inmate is agitated because her teenager refuses to listen to the caretaker, doesn't respond to her post-cards, and now won't even come to visitations. How women and men parent while incarcerated at FCADC is one of the focuses of Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership (COIPP).**





### Helping Children, Caregivers, and Parents

COIPP is an all-volunteer, nonprofit group that was started approximately 15 years ago by a woman whose father was incarcerated when she was a teenager. As an adult, working as a public school teacher and eventually a supervisor, she observed that a child with an incarcerated parent felt alone, isolated, and different. She believed that no child should feel that way.

The mission of COIPP is to foster the growth of strong, resilient, hopeful children who are impacted by an incarcerated loved one in the Frederick County, Maryland region. Their first project was simple. Whenever members of COIPP were available, backpacks stuffed with school supplies, books, and picture frames were given out in the portico outside FCADC, for free, to children or their caregivers as they waited to visit loved ones. Since that time, the mission and vision of COIPP have grown greatly.

The organization now serves children with monthly free activities, gift cards when there is a need for basic supplies, financial assistance for extracurricular activities, and more. There are caregiver activities such as workshops on topics of interest, such as:

- building a child's resilience after trauma,
- dealing with loss, and
- encouraging the sharing of feelings, including anger.

There are gift cards for emergency needs, scholarships to the local community college, and "respite" evenings that are held several times a year. During these evenings, the children play and eat dinner in another room, while the caregivers also have dinner, relax, and talk with others in the same child-rearing situations. Sometimes there are speakers and a distribution of resources to assist the caregivers. There is always the opportunity for discussion about difficult issues, or just chats and laughter. These are just a few examples of how COIPP supports the children and their caregivers.

As COIPP grew, helping the incarcerated parents to stay connected to their children became important. Our members felt that serving the parent is part of a three-way connection—the child, the caregiver, and the

incarcerated parent. All three must benefit from our organization. With that said, we knew we had to work with the parents in the detention center in order to best meet the needs of their children.

### Studies on Incarcerated Children

According to a 2010 study by the Pew Charitable Trust, more than 2.7 million children in the United States have a parent in jail. It is estimated that 1.2 million incarcerated women and men are parents to children, from birth to 18 years old, and 1 in 28 children has an incarcerated mommy or daddy. A recent analysis by the National Survey of Children's Health finds the number climbs to 5 million children when the count reflects how many children have experienced a parent in jail at some time in their life. However, this number could be even higher. This survey does not take into consideration the number of parents not living with their children who become incarcerated.

As stated above, it is estimated that 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent. This number has leveled off in recent years, but the number of incarcerated women is climbing. For example, the number of incarcerated women rose more than 700% from 1980 to 1994, according to an article in *U.S. News and World Report*. In the article, Kristen Turney, an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, states that an incarcerated parent can put a strain on the entire family. Their children are more likely to be more aggressive, engage in fights, or miss school.

In the same article, Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, states that these children may become ambivalent or anxious about relationships. It is also generally accepted that there is a

financial strain on the family, as reiterated by the Rutgers University, Camden, campus group that deals with incarceration issues for children.

An important study also receiving much attention today is on ACEs—Adverse Childhood Experiences. This long-term study by Kaiser-Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found 10 risk factors that negatively impact young children. One factor is having an incarcerated parent. If there are four or more risk factors during early childhood years, that child is at a greater risk for serious issues—such as bone fracture, cancer and lung disease, drug use, and difficulty completing an appropriate education—as he or she grows up.

As we study ACEs, more ways can be found to mitigate future problems resulting from risk factors. For parents, one is concrete help in terms of need. Another is the parents' basic understanding of child development. Helping children when they are young and helping their parents can be a benefit for these children throughout their lives.

### Parenting From Afar

For the past 6 years, COIPP has offered a 10-week class called Parenting From Afar to the female inmates at FCADC. One year ago, COIPP started classes for the male inmates. The classes are open to any inmate who is a parent, grandparent, relative, or with a child in his or

#### Positive Evaluations

It is hard to measure the success of Parenting From Afar classes. However, after every 10 sessions, the participants complete written evaluations of the class. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Comments shared by the women just in the past year include:

- “Ms Shari and Ms Cathy are the most encouraging women. They have inspired me to be a better person and have encouraged a relationship with my girls even though they are grown”;
- “I love this class! I look forward to coming to parenting with Cathy and Shari every Wednesday night. They teach us healthy ways to parent our children inside and outside of jail. They both are truly a blessing! Thank you”;
- “The parenting class offered at FCADC is amazing. It helps me put in perspective about how to teach my children and to be a better, more understanding mother. It also helps me by teaching me ways to communicate not only with my son, but with the caretaker who is caring for my children.”

her life. Everyone who completes the 10 weeks consecutively receives a 10-day reduction in their sentence.

There are 10 one-hour sessions per class with female volunteers teaching women and male volunteers teaching men. Our curriculum, activities, and articles are compiled into a workbook with 10 chapters, and each participant receives one at the first session.

Each chapter contains the topic, situations for discussion, and strategies to help the participants work with their children and the caretakers when there are conflicts or differences of opinions in child-raising. These situations usually serve as the jumping-off points for the conversations.

The “homemade” curriculum was created after years of listening and discussing issues about which incarcerated parents were concerned. These sessions include child development, stress, discipline, feelings, and more.

Each Parenting From Afar session has the same structure. We begin with a game or activity that initiates a discussion with the participants in terms of their own experiences and beliefs. Next, we discuss situations that came from previously incarcerated parents. We talk about how a situation makes us feel, how to respond, and what to do as a follow-up. At the end of each session, each participant is given pre-stamped postcards, one for each child. They are encouraged to write a positive message that refers to that session's topic. For example, if the topic is discipline, one could write, “I heard you followed directions at school! Way to go.” The final session is a favorite as participants “go shopping for books” for their children.

Before shopping, the participants listen to the teacher read the children's book, *The Dot* by Peter H. Reynolds. In this short story, a child leaves her mark in her world by becoming a watercolor artist creating different dots on different paper. Next, we engage in discussion about what kind of mark the parents want their children (and themselves) to leave on the world. The participants then create watercolor cards for their children and choose one book from a selection of award-winning hardcover children's books on every topic from feelings and love to coping with an incarcerated loved one. We mail the books with the cards the next day so the women and men know their packages are quickly received.

We encourage the incarcerated parents to send their marked-up workbooks to caregivers and their own parents in the hope that everyone is on the same page in terms of child rearing.

For the past few years we have limited our class to 10 to 12 participants, which is the size most successful for discussions and on-task behaviors.

We must add that the classes are so successful that some women and men who finish the class want to return for the next session, despite not receiving any more time off their sentences. One of the female inmates

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speaking for the group said that she wanted the teachers to know that there were three things that keep the inmates going: parenting class, food, and television—in that order.

Parenting From Afar is funded, in part, by a grant from the Frederick County Local Management Board through the Frederick County Office for Children and Families. This grant required collaborations between organizations working with children impacted by incarceration, and has allowed COIPP, in recent years, to form a strong partnership with the Frederick County Mental Health Association.

This partnership created a collaborative program called Families Impacted by Incarceration Program (FIIP), and includes the Parenting From Afar classes and the workshops held in the community by COIPP. FIIP also has one-on-one meetings with caregivers and children who may need extra assistance, which is handled by MHA. FIIP is in its third year. With this collaboration, COIPP has been able to add to their resources and strengths.

## The Bear Project

Another favorite activity COIPP provides to the detention center is the “Bear Project.” Once a year, those who successfully completed the parenting class get a special opportunity. We deliver a variety of special stuffed animals. Each cuddly animal contains a mini recorder.

On separate days, women and men can record personal messages for each of their children. The mini recorder is then placed back into the stuffed animal, and COIPP mails the bears to each child. The best part? When the child hugs the stuffed animal, the parent’s voice and personal message plays into the child’s ear! Parents come back to us years after the bears were made to say that their children still sleep with the stuffed animals, playing a parent’s voice each time before bed. We also find that this activity builds cooperation among the participants.

Recently, a father was working on his message to his son. Another participant stopped him and told him he needed a redo, that his voice was very sad and that it would upset his son. The father agreed. He re-recorded his message in a positive, upbeat voice, and thanked his friend for having his back.

This year was the first that the men participated in the “Bear Project.” Comments shared at the end of the recording session included:

- “How can we help you?”;
- “When I get out, can I call to do things with you?”; and
- “I just made six gifts for my kids. This is the first time in a long time I could do this.”

## “Reconnecting”

Once a month, we teach a class called “Reconnecting” to male inmates who are soon to be released. The hourly class is about reconnecting with their children when they have been away for either a short or long time. In the class, we discuss what kind of relationship the parent hopes to have with his children when released. The men take a simple true/false quiz that shows the different stereotypical views a parent may have about his relationship with his children.

For example, we discuss the lack of research that says a child with an incarcerated parent will also go to jail himself or herself, and we negate the view that all children will be thrilled to have that parent return home. In other words, we spend time talking about how different children react differently to an incarcerated parent and what happens when that parent returns home. This always leads to rich conversation. From there, we talk about ACEs and how the parent’s incarceration may affect the child. This leads to discussions of typical, yet different, situations that may arise when this parent returns home.

As with Parenting From Afar, these situations have been shared by men who returned home after their incarceration. For example, while the parent is in jail, the rules about bedtime, dinner, and homework may change. We focus on how dad may feel about this and how to communicate these feelings to the caregivers. The teacher then reads aloud the children’s book *The Rabbit Listened* by Dori Doerfield, and we discuss the importance of being a good listener when our children talk.

We offer to send the book to each man’s children. Inevitably, everyone asks for books to be mailed. Recently, after I read *The Rabbit Listened*, I asked the group what they learned from the book. One stoic man, looking very intense, said, “Ms. Shari, I learned to listen!” As he left the class, he quietly thanked me for “a great session.”

## Other Offerings

The Sharing Fair is another highly successful program at the detention center. It is scheduled six times a year. Thanks to the help of the correctional officers, tables are placed outside and under the visitation portico. During the fair, resources that families want and need are given away. With the handiwork of church groups, after school groups, and retired teachers across Frederick County, we are well-stocked with hand-tied, soft fleece blankets made for us.

We also provide family-size hygiene products, new underwear and shoes for children, gently-used books, art supplies, school supplies, diapers, and more! Depending on the time of year, we offer new jackets, boots, hats, mittens, and scarves for children. There is even face painting and balloon animals during the fairs.

The purpose is simple. We recognize that many children and caregivers are very nervous before a visit. Our goal is two-fold. We want to provide an experience that can create an anxiety-free and happy time for families. Secondly, we want to give the families what they need.

In addition, we have created a Book Nook in the visitation lobby. Thanks to donations from the community, there are children’s books housed in a small area. Community organizations painted murals on the Book Nook walls, and one couple from Frederick donated child-friendly furniture and book baskets. We encourage children to look at the books while they wait to visit, then take books home on their way out.

Recently, a mother from the Frederick community approached our board. Her husband had been in different jails over a number of years, and she wanted to discuss how COIPP could help her children. She mentioned the Book Nook at FCADC. When her husband went to prison, her children were upset because they could no longer bring books home after visitation. They thought all jails had a “library.” She indicated that looking forward to something as simple as a taking home a gently-used book made a difference in her children’s views of their visits.

## Conclusion

We have many goals in our program, not the least of which is giving children back their childhoods. None of our activities is difficult to do. None is expensive. We believe that each can—and does—make a difference. Hopefully, some of these can easily be emulated by those who work in the detention centers and prisons or those who live in the community. For more information, Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership can be contacted at [coippfrederick@yahoo.com](mailto:coippfrederick@yahoo.com). ■

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**Shari Ostrow Scher** has been an educator for more than 50 years. Born in Brooklyn, she has taught in all settings, from childcare to college, and has been a teacher, a supervisor and a local and national speaker. She has won a number of local, statewide and national awards including twice winning the Hood College Adjunct Professor of the Year, the Maryland 100 Women of the Year Award, the Maryland Parent/Teacher Association Educator of the Year, and more. In her retirement she spends all of her time as the founder and volunteer Executive Director of Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership.

**Cathy Anderson** has been a lifetime educator, recently retiring from the Frederick County, Maryland Public School system. She started her career at Maryland School for the Deaf, and continued teaching grades kindergarten through third in public schools. Though Cathy resides in Frederick, she always finds time to visit her children and grandchildren, focus on her artwork, and visit the South Jersey shore. Cathy is a Board member of Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership and always makes herself available to volunteer, both in the jail and with caregivers and children impacted by incarceration.

