

# PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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## Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Because of severe sentencing and the drastic increase in incarceration of women, the number of children who have parents in jail or prison has risen from about 1,500,000 in 1999 to 2,300,000 in 2004, and now is estimated at over 3 million.

These children suffer from a range of traumatic experiences: first and foremost, separation from a significant relationship, and also: seeing their parents taken away; not being able to visit for long periods of time or not being able to visit at all; being treated, when visiting jail or prison, like prisoners themselves (e.g., frisked, patted down, taken through barred gate after barred gate, visiting through thick glass windows, their voices mediated through telephones, never getting to sit in a lap or hug a beloved parent).

Reacting to their situation, boys tend to explode, becoming anxious and aggressive; girls tend to implode, becoming silent, anxious, withdrawn, and depressed. Although these children are in many family childcare homes, classrooms, childcare centers and after school programs, their needs regularly go unmet. Children of prisoners often fear disclosing their story to others because of the shame and difference that attach to their status. They may surround themselves with an aura of secrecy. Others may brag, covering their pain with a brave face, or become cynical about the possibilities for themselves and their families.

It is therefore important for educators to help these children feel valued and prized, and to let them know that having a parent in prison *isn't what defines them*. If a child feels there is someone who is interested, supportive and non-judgmental, who will listen and talk about the difficulties s/he is facing, that can help immeasurably.

Our society has generally ignored the upheaval in the lives of children whose parents are removed. Children with parents in prison have rights that should become part of our laws and the standard practices nationwide. For example, children are entitled to safety, care, and support when a parent is arrested--and they should never be judged, blamed, or labeled because of a parent's incarceration. They are also entitled to be heard when decisions are made that affect them or their parent, and to have regular contact with him or her, including a lifelong relationship if they so choose. It is paramount that they be told the truth, hard as that may be to tell, and it is our responsibility to see that our society creates a truth worth telling.

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Psychologists for Social Responsibility also supports changes to current policies so that children's outcomes become a key consideration in the arrest, trial, and sentencing of parents. To prevent unnecessary stress and potential neglect, it makes sense to investigate alternatives to locking up mothers and fathers in prison. Many of these parents would be able to care for their children from home if they were sentenced to house arrest or community service instead, and their children would be the primary beneficiaries of this change. More generally, at the present time there is virtually no public outcry on behalf of these at-risk children. Public information campaigns are essential and the rare model programs must be brought to the attention of policy makers. Keeping these (and all) children safe, comfortable, and whole must become a national priority.

*Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at [info@psysr.org](mailto:info@psysr.org). We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.*

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