

# Supporting Kids of Incarcerated Parents

How can we help children deal with the emotional strain while their parents are incarcerated?

In the United States, more than 5 million children – 1 in 14 – have incarcerated parents. As a result, coping with the effects of having an incarcerated parent is a major part of many children's lives.

One Center for Healthy Minds faculty member is rethinking how we help kids of incarcerated parents in wide-reaching ways – from Muppets to policy.

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, the Dorothy A. O'Brien Professor of Human Ecology at UW –Madison, believes interventions with children of incarcerated parents and their caregivers can buffer stress and promote resilience in children.

She served as an advisor to *Sesame Street* for 4 years on their Emmy-nominated



Poehlmann-Tynan's work ventures into new territory, as previous research surrounding incarceration focused on the individuals incarcerated and paid little attention to the well-being of caregivers or children. Interventions for both incarcerated parents have yielded mixed results, and there's been little evidence to guide families in how to navigate these challenging situations with young children. Few interventions for affected children exist.

"There are a lot of advocates who say children shouldn't visit their incarcerated parents because it's too traumatic. Other advocates say all children should visit," Poehlmann-Tynan says. "As a scientist, I wondered, *What does the research say?* There was not a single study focusing on how children do while visiting an incarcerated parent."

Outside of the home, the science points to the impact of conditions and attributes of individuals, families and communities that can help children cope more effectively. Providing children of incarcerated parents with stable living arrangements with positive, stimulating and educationally supportive home environments generally improves children's cognitive and emotional well-being – a relevant discovery since these children are more likely to have unstable placements relative to the general population.

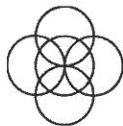
Poehlmann-Tynan hopes her research continues to spark a larger, nationwide policy conversation about how children interact with the criminal justice system, whether it's updating standards to making visits more child-friendly or exploring alternatives to incarceration. She is collaborating with other researchers who are working on an initiative called Safeguarding Children of Incarcerated Parents to develop protocols for healthy parent-child visits during parental incarceration.

She intends for her work to reach policymakers, who can strengthen antipoverty measures and programs aimed to provide support to economically disadvantaged families and families of color, who experience parental incarceration at higher rates.

*- Brita Larson*



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