Having an Incarcerated Parent: Children's Grief and Loss

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LOSS IS AN INEVITABLE, INTEGRAL PART OF LIVING LIFE. The incarceration of a parent is a particular, peculiar kind of loss, as it is both similar to and different from other kinds of losses. In the United States as many as 3 million children experience the incarceration of at least one parent at any given time."

In this resource guide, I discuss how the loss of a parent is both like and unlike other losses. I describe how children cope with loss at different ages and developmental stages. Last, I will offer recommendations for the caregivers of the children of incarcerated parents.

There are some generalizations that apply to children of all ages and others that are more developmentally specific. Finally, some specific suggestions will cover the following questions: **What do I do, as a caregiver? What do I say as a caregiver?**

At the foundation of caregiving is providing the child left behind with a safe and loving, protective and caring, consistent, predictable environment. What follows begins with simple common-sense suggestions on how to provide care for the child at each developmental stage, by establishing a home environment of safety, protection, and structure. For each age and stage, this resource guide is designed to build on this foundation of creating safe surroundings, addressing specific developmentally appropriate needs.

This resource sheet is part of a research initiative titled: "Parent and Caregiver's Perceptions of Storytelling as Creative Intervention for Children With Incarcerated Parents" also known as the "Storybook Research Project." This project and research was funded by Walden University, Faculty Research Initiative Grant. The Principle Investigator for this Project is Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, HS-BCP. The two Co-Principle Researchers are Dr. Geoffrey Johnson, Dr. Renata Hedrington-Jones For more information, please visit: https://www.mystoryandme.com to contact the research team, email avon.hart-johnson2@mail.waldenu.edu

Complicated grief

Box 1.1. As of this publication, our team of investigators conducted seven focus groups in the Washington, D.C, Virginia, and Maryland areas. The study is titled, **"Parents and Caregivers' Perceptions of Storytelling as a Creative Intervention for Children With Incarcerated Parents.**" Data collection occurred from October, 2018 to October, 2019. The goal of this study was, first, to understand the communication strategies used by parents and caregivers who discussed parental incarceration with young children under 10 years old. Second, we wanted to develop a web portal populated with resources based on our findings and the expertise gleaned from these guardians and experts. This knowledge also served as the basis for stories about parental incarceration. Our resource sheets are constructed, based on the study results. We refer to these resources as "iCareSheets." See https://www.mystoryandme.com for more resources such as ebooks, activity sheets, and other tools designed for having discussions with children under 10 years old about parental incarceration.

Research Team: ***Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson; Dr. Geoffrey Johnson, and Dr. Renata Hedrington-Jones***

Regardless of circumstances, the process of grief is never simple, rarely uncomplicated, never easy. But some losses are more complicated than others. When a parent is incarcerated, the absence of the parent is typically experienced by the family as a loss. To frame it very simply, the loss of a family member to incarceration differs from other losses because of the stigma, shame, and embarrassment associated with imprisonment.

In addition, loss through the incarceration of a parent may vary in duration and does not have the finality of a permanent loss through death. These important, yet nuanced differences make the task of the caregiver more challenging, especially if the incarcerated parent is absent, and usually not easily accessible– not physically present or available. It is these last circumstances that also contribute to the ambiguity of the experience for a child of a parent lost to incarceration.

We will return to these interconnected themes of stigma, shame, embarrassment, and inaccessibility later in this resource guide, when offering recommendations to caregivers. In short, it is important to acknowledge all of these emotional challenges. Unacknowledged, unaddressed and unexpressed, stigma, shame, embarrassment and inaccessibility can derail the best caregiving intentions.

What do we know generally about how children and adolescents experience and express grief and loss?

Some children and teens express and experience loss like adults. They talk about it, and they look sad. But everyone grieves differently and everyone has the right to grieve differently. Often children may not talk directly about the loss. They may express their feelings symbolically through play. They may "somaticize," or increase their complaints about physical aches and pains, as a way of getting their emotional needs met.

But more than for adults, childhood grief comes and goes. Children grieve in cycles. More than adults, children need time to take a break from grief. Children need to hear that it's okay to take a break from grief, that laughing and having fun are not disrespectful to the person who died or who is absent. Light moments can be an important part of the grieving process.

Sometimes, a childhood loss is re-experienced by the child at a later developmental stress point or at a milestone event. For example, not having a parent at one's high school or college graduation or when one gets married or when one has a child of his/her own, may trigger renewed, unresolved or unaddressed grief.

Experiencing parental loss due to incarceration through childhood–
birth through age three years (preverbal and early verbal stages)

Developmental challenges in infancy:

Erik Erickson, developmental psychologist, tells us that the developmental task of the first years of life are to establish trusting relationships with our caregivers. Human infants experience the longest childhood of any primate. These early connections are of the utmost importance because these connections become the foundations for attachment. Early caregiving relationships become the template for all relationships that follow. The infant who is securely attached, grows into a young child who

perceives the world as a predictable, safe, and caring place. Secure attachments early on also provide a foundation allowing children to feel good about themselves.

How can infants know their parent has been imprisoned? They can't even talk, yet.

When children are in the preverbal stage, they certainly can't talk about their feelings or share their thoughts. Because infants can't talk, they rely on other senses like hearing, smell, touch, vision, and the caregiver's cues to understand the world and to process experiences. They don't know about jail, prison, grief, or mourning.

But infants are acutely attuned to the environment around them. They may sense emotional shifts and changes in their new primary caregiver's demeanor and mood. They might notice absences of people to whom they are bonded and attached. Infants notice changes. How they cope with these changes is likely dependent both upon individual temperament and how we as adults respond to them.

What behaviors might you expect from an infant during the period of mourning the loss of a parent?

Some infants are extremely sensitive, attuned to environmental cues, others not so much. Some children, by temperament, are more reactive to changes in their surroundings than others. You might notice disruptions in the infant's regular behavior: changes in sleeping, eating, or hyperirritability. The child who once slept easily through the night may wake up or seem more easily distracted. The baby who ate voraciously may now be more picky, finicky.

Caregiver suggestions in infancy:

What do I do?

Rules, Rituals, and Routines

Kids are like adults, just more so. The first step in building a safe environment is to create an environment where rules are clear, schedules are regular but

not rigid, and where routines are predictable. When times get tough, we as adults fall back on predictability, consistency, schedules. As a caregiver of an infant in mourning, it is important to keep life as consistent and predictable as possible. Try, to the extent you can, to keep the environment the same. With all children, especially those in the preverbal stage, what we do is more important than what we say.

What do I say to the infant in my care?

Now is a good time to continue to strengthen existing bedtime routines. Bedtime for all children should be at a regular, age - appropriate time, to the extent humanly possible. Sometimes, a bedtime bath becomes part of the ritual. Reading a story can also become part of the ritual. Now is a good time to begin reading to the child. It's okay to read them books written for infants, but also begin building a library of age-appropriate books that can be read to the child at bedtime.

Experiencing parental loss due to incarceration, through the eyes of a toddler and preschool- age child

Developmental challenges of the toddler and preschool years

Toddlerhood through the preschool years represents the dawning of a child's emerging sense of self and identity. Children at this stage and age are mastering tasks that will take them into the next developmental stage. These skills include but are not limited to walking, talking, and mastering toilet training. Language and motor skills alone facilitate the child's development of a sense of self, separate yet still very dependent upon the caregiver. These are years of rapid, fast-paced growth. Children may have a vocabulary of one hundred words between the ages of twelve and eighteen months. They possess a word bank of two hundred words at age two. And by age three, the child's vocabulary virtually explodes. Erik Erickson suggests that the child who can master age- appropriate, self-

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regulatory skills feels success and good about himself.

Some children at this age are entering day care or preschool outside the home for the first time. The challenges and tasks for caregivers during toddlerhood and preschool are different from those at infancy. Toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners are more independent than infants. But in order to grow and develop, children in this age group require considerable support from those around them. Developing language skills allow the child to say, "no." Motor skills allow children in this age group to separate themselves physically from us. What builds success during this stage is knowing that the caregiver will be available, be there for touching base, after the child goes out to explore the world.

Later in this period, the child continues to grow, develop, and learn through play and interacting with his/her peers. Early on, when children play, they play beside rather than with each other. As the child progresses from being a toddler to a preschooler to an early school- age child, the nature of play shifts and changes to be more interactive and cooperative. The child who masters the developmental jobs of this stage continues to build a positive, increasingly complicated and differentiated sense of who she is, he is.

Box 1.2. ***Co-Parenting Boundary Ambiguity***
In our research study, we found that family member roles, responsibilities, and boundaries are sometimes blurred. For instance, a 5-year-old might be assigned chores to feed her younger 18- month- old sibling a bottle or help mom or dad clean up.
Boundary ambiguities seem to affect both family roles and the ways in which narratives about the missing parent are expressed to children. Other examples of areas of blurred roles would be a mother or grandmother taking on the role of primary breadwinner, seeking work to support the family.
The incarcerated parent's role may blur as well. They may be considered the secondary parent, while the non-incarcerated parent's role may have emerged as the primary parent.

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What kinds of behaviors might I expect from my toddler/preschooler when the parent is absent?

Human reactions to grief span a wide continuum. As stated above, what makes caregiving challenging is the wide variation based on individual

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temperamental differences and a whole host of circumstances. Reactions to the loss and absence of a parent may or may not be consistent with how we know the child. But as a generalization, regression is not unusual. And because the ability to master and regulate basic functions is a relatively new and still evolving skill, the child may begin to present as younger than her years.

For example, the preschooler who spoke in full sentences may now begin to talk in one-word utterances or even become nonverbal. The toddler who was bold and adventurous may now be clingy and fearful. The preschooler who was dry during the day and night may begin to have accidents.

Caregiver suggestions for the toddler through preschool years: What do I do?

Rules, Rituals, Routines, and Reassurance

Kids are like adults, just more so. The first step in building a safe environment is to create an environment where rules are clear, schedules are regular but not rigid, and where routines are predictable. When times get tough, we as adults fall back on predictability, consistency. As a caregiver of a toddler or preschooler in mourning, it is important to keep life as consistent and predictable as possible. Try, to the extent you can, to keep the environment the same. With all children, especially those in this emerging verbal stage, what we do is more important than what we say.

What do I say to my toddler/preschooler about his/her missing parent?

As stated earlier in the section above, in addressing caregiving of infants, bedtime rituals continue to be important. Issues introduced during the bedtime storytelling ritual may or may not surface during the day. ***Baby Star Finds Happy*** is a good addition to the library repertoire of bedtime stories because we can use the story as our guide for difficult conversations. Things to keep in mind when talking with children in the early verbal stages:

1. Keep your language simple, with easy words, short sentences. Do not

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overexplain. The child does not need to know all the details of the parent's crime.
2. Rehearse what you plan to say, script your words carefully. Be intentional and thoughtful.
3. Try to anticipate the questions your child may have.
4. Be ready to answer questions as they arise during talks.
5. Children of this age have very short attention spans.
6. The original telling of the child's parent's narrative is something that can be built upon at a later age, and stage.
7. Truth telling is always best. But this doesn't mean disclosing all details. Less can also be more. Secrets having a way of circling back to damage trust and harm the relationship between the child and caregiver.
8. Use the themes of ***Baby Star Finds Happy*** story to generate a dialogue with the child. What are those themes? By the way, these are themes applicable to all age groups.
9. Read the story through once– either all at once, or in sections
10. Then circle back, read the story, this time using the activity sheets at natural pause points in the story.
11. The process of coming to terms with a

Box. 1.3 ***Emotional Ambivalence***

During our research study, parents and caregivers shared concerns about having mixed emotions about communicating with young children regarding parental incarceration. Some respondents indicated that they felt ill-equipped to have these sensitive conversations. Others feared the consequences associated with telling the child the truth.

Parents/caregivers also expressed their own emotional ambivalence, where they conveyed experiences and feelings of inadequacy, grief, ambiguous loss, states of symbolic imprisonment (feeling imprisoned to the situation), and fear, which indirectly affected communication with their child/children. There was also fear about the adverse impacts of telling children the truth. These research sheets are designed to help with these difficult discussions.

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parent's absence is an ongoing process. The issue may arise multiple times during the parent's absence.

Themes from *Baby Star Finds Happy* for the toddler preschool set

1. Absence of the parent;
2. Feelings of sadness, anger, worry;
3. Need to be reassured by the caregiver that they will be kept safe and cared for.

But what do I say?

Daddy/mommy/uncle/aunt is going to be away for a while. Daddy/mommy broke some grownup rules. Daddy/mommy made very bad choices. Daddy/mommy are in a place called jail/prison. This is where grownups go when they have broken rules.

When you go to 'time out,' what do you do? You sit quietly. You think about what you did, think about how you felt or what you were thinking when you did what you did. You think about what you might do differently next time. Prison is like 'time out' for grownups.

Generally, when we talk about explaining parental absence in developmentally appropriate terms, the caregiver will need to keep in mind the child's chronological age and the child's social emotional age. Some children are old souls, five going on fifty, wise beyond their years. The caregiver may be able to approach the old soul with verbally sophisticated and nuanced language. While cognitively astute, sometimes the old soul is "pseudo-mature." This is a term that means the child may behave more maturely than is in actuality true. Since old souls can be developmentally uneven, advanced language with the old soul is okay, *if* the developmentally appropriate emotional needs of the child are met and taken into account.

Other children, for various reasons, may chronologically be fifteen, but emotionally and socially behave and think like a preadolescent. During chats about the missing parent, the

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caregiver will want to tailor the conversation to the child's emotional and social age.

If there is going to be contact, by phone or visiting, the details associated with preparing a child should be worked out beforehand. Tools to assist with these discussions include stories such as ***Jamie's Big Visit***, a story about prison visiting. ***Baby Star Finds Happy***, explains what happens when a child's parent goes to prison and offers an understanding of the emotional impact. ***Rocko's Guitar*** and ***Truth and the Big Dinner*** are stories about working through the difficulties when a child has not been informed of the truth about their parent's incarceration.

In cases where the parent is imprisoned because he/she has hurt the child, please see the special link on our website: Https://mystoryandme.com under resources.

Caregiver suggestions during the school-age years, ages five to twelve: Developmental challenges of the school- age set

Developmentally, mastery of school related learning tasks, making friends, discovering and mastering interests, are the job of the school -aged child. Successful completion of these tasks leads to the child continuing to self-define, as a good writer/reader/math student, a good friend, a good musician, a good athlete. These are all building blocks of identity and the sense of self.

What kinds of reactions or behaviors should I anticipate from the child?

In a perfect world, we would be able to predict how the children in our care will react when told a parent is going to be absent for an indeterminate amount of time. The caregiver's best bet is to be prepared for any reaction. Some children are very regulated and predictable. Others may not react immediately to bad news. As with other times in raising children, the caregiver should be prepared to address the parental absence, not just once but multiple times.

Like the toddler/preschooler, the school- age child may

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begin to behave like a younger child in reaction to the news of a parent's absence. Sleep, appetite disruptions, and disruptions in concentrating, keeping emotions regulated, and in ability to remember, for instance, can be normal reactions. Also, the caregiver left behind might be the recipient of anger from the child that is felt toward the absent parent. Although it may not seem logical, the caregiver's mere presence may convey to the child a sense of safety.

What do I do?

Rules, Rituals, Routines, Reassurance, Roles

We build on or, depending upon the circumstances, infuse safety, consistency, predictability in everything we do as caregivers. Caregiving of a child of incarcerated parents must be thoughtful, conscious, and intentional. During the school years, not only at bedtime or during family dinners, but also moments in the car, or other random and unpredictable times, continue to be a good time for sharing about the day: feelings, activities, thoughts. In the absence of a parent, school-age children need reassurance and some explanation of the change in roles. It helps the school -age child to know that adults will to continue to care for them and keep them safe, not the other way around. The school- age child will need to be relieved of the burden of feeling the need to "self-parent" , or to take care of the adults or their siblings. The

Box 1.3 ***Gatekeepers of the Narrative.***
In this research study, parents and caregivers were found to be gatekeepers of the narrative about parental incarceration. The stories about the parents' whereabouts conveyed to children were based on the point of view held by these guardians. In most families, the parent/caregiver determined the communication approach to explain parental incarceration. We found three primary communication strategies: direct, indirect, and abstain. A parent/caregiver might opt to use direct communication, which involves being honest and truthful, using age-appropriate language. They might also use an indirect approach, which includes modifying the truth by creating a fallacy or misleading the child about the parent's whereabouts. Finally, they may decide not to discuss the matter at all. Each of these narratives was found to have a consequence. For more discussion on this theme, see https://www.mystoryandme.com.

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school years are an excellent time to begin the ritual of regular weekly family meetings. This is a time for all family members to share experiences and problem- solve.

Star Finds Happy is written for 3rd- to -5th graders. This means that very able 3rd and 4th grade readers and most 5th graders would be able to read the story independently. Somewhat less able readers at all levels might need some help. The book is made to be read all at once in one sitting, or it can be read in parts over time.

What do I say?
Simple age -appropriate explanations:
"Daddy/mommy, uncle/ auntie made some bad choices. Daddy/ mommy/ uncle/auntie is going to be away for a while. They broke grown- up rules. Another name for grown- up rules is laws. When grownups break the law, they go to jail or prison. Going to jail or prison is a consequence for breaking the law. It's like 'time out.' When grownups go to prison, they have time to think about what they did, to think about how they were feeling when they did what they did. And they get to think about what they might do differently next time."

Using the Themes of *Star Finds Happy* with the school- age group
Specific to reading, the developmental task in the early school years is" phonemic awareness." That is to say, in the early grades, in reading, the task is to figure out how to " sound out" and read the words. In being able to read the words, children quickly begin to derive meaning from what they have read. Reading comprehension tasks during kindergarten through the first half of third grade are simple ones. Typically, in early reading, the answer to reading comprehension tasks is visible and very apparent in the text.

Themes of Star's story for school-age children

1. Loss of a loved one.
2. Forgiving vs. Forgetting.
3. Finding appropriate strategies for self-soothing, self-calming.

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4. Can we make our own luck?
5. What are some reasonable strategies for staying connected to a parent who is absent?
6. Carefully seeking corrective emotional experiences; carefully seeking safe, protective and caring adults.
7. Carefully seeking support from appropriate others outside the house or family.
8. Labeling feelings.
9. Normalizing the feelings that accompany loss; acknowledging feelings of ambivalence or double dip feelings.
10. Blaming oneself because one's parent is gone (harboring guilt).
11. Taking responsibility and facing consequences for one's actions.
12. Differentiating between mistakes that children make and mistakes that adults make when making bad choices and breaking the law.
13. If I make a bad choice, am I going to prison?
14. Helping the child create his or her own narrative and telling of the events.
15. Negative or bad things happen to us, and we keep on.

Reading comprehension questions

1. Who are the characters? Describe the characters in the story?
2. What happens in the story?
3. Where does the story take place?

Around the middle of third grade, the curriculum shifts and the reading comprehension task increases in complexity. The expectation is that the child be able to answer basic, easily found in the text, questions. And in addition to "who?", "what?" and "where?", from mid - 3rd grade on, children are tasked with answering the more abstract, higher level "why?" questions:

What do you think will happen next?
Why do you think…?
What do you think Star is feeling?
What do you think Grandma and Dad are thinking?
What do you think Star's mother is thinking while she is in jail?
How are the characters in the story feeling?
How do you think the story will end?
Name some things that make you happy, angry, sad.
Which character in the book is most like you, and why?

Caregiver suggestions during the teenage years:
Developmental challenges in the teen years

We build on, or depending upon the circumstances, infuse safety, consistency, predictability in everything we do as caregivers. Caregiving of a child, a teenager of incarcerated parents, must be thoughtful, conscious and intentional. During the school year, bedtime , and family dinners, and also moments in the car, or other random and unpredictable times, continue to be a good time for sharing about the day: feelings, activities, thoughts.

The teen years bring with them new challenges for the adolescent of incarcerated parents and for the caregiver. It is helpful to think about adolescence as a revisiting of some of the developmental challenges first faced in toddlerhood. Like the toddler, the adolescent works on identity formation and on becoming a separate, independent individual. He or she works on these tasks in ways similar to the toddler years. The teenager's focus is decreasingly on family and increasingly on being part of the peer group. There is the same push/ pull of the toddler years, for instance, wanting to be more independent and mature than one is really ready for. And the desire also to return from

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exploring the world to touch base with a secure, limit- setting, boundaried caregiver.

Limit setting in the teen years is every bit as important as limit setting during other childhood stages. However, the task of setting limits with a teenager is much more complex because the broader world the teenager is entering is much more complicated than that of the one launching her, represented by family, home and school.

The developmental challenges of the adolescent years build on the work, it is hoped, successfully completed earlier on in childhood. An adolescent works to figure out who he/ she is, who he/she wants to be with in a relationship and what he/she wants to do in life in terms of a career or job. The impact of having a parent imprisoned at this point in the teen's life, perhaps more than in any other developmental phase, is more complicated. Teenagers look to adults around them as models, as they, the adolescent is working on the issue of identity formation. Some can articulate this question clearly: "My parent is incarcerated. Am *I* going to end up being in prison?"

The adolescent is more verbal than he or she might have been earlier on. Thinking may be poised between the more concrete, simple thinking of younger stages and the more abstract, higher- level reasoning skills we see in adults. Unlike adults, the teenager may be able to think hypothetically when calm, cool, and collected, but regress and lose this ability when emotionally stirred up. And emotionally, we may see this same pattern. One day, the teenager behaves as if a young adult: responsible, respectful, mature. However more sophisticated than the toddler's simple "no," some teenagers tend to argue with everything their caregivers say.

While cognitively the adolescent may dazzle us with the ability to think and reason hypothetically, don't be fooled. The frontal lobe, the air traffic controller of the brain, will not come fully "online" until at any time from young adulthood to early middle age. The frontal

lobe is the seat of all executive functions. Among these functions are skills like planning, problem solving, emotional self-regulation, impulse control, being able to anticipate the future, anticipating consequences for one's actions, and the ability to focus. One reason that this part of the brain is the last to mature is that the frontal lobe learns from life experiences. So, yes, many bright teens can think critically. But the adolescent also believes he/ she is invincible and that no harm will come to him This limited ability to predict the future and thinking one is invulnerable explains how adolescents more than any group find themselves in situations with no easy exits.

What do I do?

The caregiving of a teenager whose parent is in prison requires a somewhat different skill set than in giving care to younger children. Some questions the caregiver would want to reflect upon are: What has my parenting style been all along? What has worked? What strategies were less successful? For the caregiver who has multiple children, what are the different ways/similar ways I approach each of the children in my care?

The reason that taking care of an adolescent is so challenging is the push/ pull nature of the developmental stage. It is a period of giving the teen some, but not too much, freedom and responsibility, being vigilant and reeling them back in when they demonstrate a need for closer supervision and scrutiny. The risks and dangers are different for teenagers than for toddlers. Keeping the teenager safe, but also letting him or her make small but not life-threatening mistakes is a delicate balance to maintain.

The weekly family meeting is still a good place for systematic, ritualized checking- in: airing of feelings and problem solving. Seek the support of a caregiver accomplice or associate in your family or community– because sometimes teenagers reject the advice you offer. They may be more accepting if a respected aunt, admired teacher, a coach or mentor tells them the same thing you have.

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What do I say? Using the themes of *Rocko's Guitar* as discussion points for caregivers of adolescents

The main character, Rocko, is described as a six-year-old boy. But because of the themes of the story, he could easily be an older child, a young adolescent.

Themes from Rocko's Guitar

- Loss of time shared with father, doing shared activities.
- Telling secrets.
- Trust in relationships.
- A child identifies with his father.
- Self-blame; my dad left because of me.
- Being asked to assume more responsibility for home upkeep in the absence of the father.
- Finding safe caregiving adults in one's community.

Questions for caregivers of teenagers, using Rocko's story

1. Who are you today? How would you describe yourself?
2. Who do you want to be when you grow up?
3. How are you like your parents? Describe and explain.
4. Can you label how you feel about father being in prison?
5. What is hardest for you about him not being here?
6. What coping strategies do you use to manage your father's absence. Tell me some positive coping strategies and some not-so- positive coping strategies?
7. Who is your support group?
8. Mom's having to compensate for the father's absence by taking a second job: Is mom now more tired? Because she is more tired and worried herself, has this changed her relationship/emotional availability with Rocko?
9. How does Rocko feel about mom not telling him the truth?
10. Why does Rocko think his mother did not tell him the truth initially?
11. What happens when Rocko does not express his feelings directly to his mother or father?

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Recommendations for caregivers. Self-care is more important than anything: An overview/guide to being a good caregiver

Self-care. The caregiver cannot take care of someone else unless he or she takes care of him or herself. How do you care for yourself, fill yourself up so that you do not feel depleted?

Have a self-care plan: This means having a reasonable thought- out plan for giving yourself needed respite and quiet, alone time. Is there someone in your support circle who can take the child(ren) for an afternoon or evening, so you can go for a walk, go grocery shopping unencumbered, go to a movie, read a book?

Ask for help. Never feel the need to worry alone. See caregivers' resources on Https://www.mystoryandme.com

Respite: Is there someone in your support circle whom you'd trust to take one or all of the children you care for, even for a few hours, for a meal, so you can get a break?

Establish a support system of family and friends.

Have a backup care plan, in writing, for short- term emergencies. Make sure you share these plans with all involved.

Make plans, in writing: who will take care of the children, more long-term vs a short emergency, if something happens to you. Make sure you have shared these plans with all those involved.

Take care of yourself, your physical health and mental health, for wellbeing.
See your doctor and dentist regularly.

Consider participating in either individual counseling or participating in a small support group for others who are caring for children of incarcerated parents. Is there someone in your support circle to whom you can speak freely– someone who will not judge, but who also will not enable? Feeling

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understood in a moment of need is a priceless gift.

Take care of yourself spiritually: Religious and spiritual beliefs bring great comfort to some. Church communities provide support and acceptance during times of emotional need.

Be forgiving of yourself; do your best: The children in your care are not the only ones affected by a parent's incarceration. You, too, are affected. You have every right to have negative feelings about the person incarcerated. However, as in other caregiving circumstances, like divorce, criticizing the incarcerated parent to the child directly is not productive in the long or short run. Such behavior will ultimately damage the child's self-image, the child's relationship with you and the incarcerated parent. It is more than okay to talk in a disparaging manner to peers, your mental health provider, your doctor, in other words, other adults in your life who will understand, not judge, and honor your confidentiality.

Intentional caregiving: When talking about the incarcerated parent to the children in your care, do your best to be measured, intentional. Take a moment to yourself to carefully script what it is you want to say to the children in your charge. Consider the child's age and developmental stage, choosing language that can be understood easily by a child of that age.

Truth telling: Keeping secrets has a way of coming back to haunt us all. While in crisis, telling the child a developmentally appropriate rendition of what happened may seem cruel and unfair. In a world that moves so fast and is so complicated, our motivation may be pure. For all responsible adults and caregivers, we want to let our children be children if they can. But often, in our own shock, shame, self-blame and embarrassment, we forget the resilience of children. And we forget their ability, with our support, to bounce back from what life throws at them.

Truth telling is hard. But consider these questions as you prepare

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your script for your conversation about the absent parent. Consider reading *Truth and The Big Dinner* as a means of explaining incarceration and having a discussion about truth, versus hiding or avoiding the truth.

Would I rather the child in my care hear about what happened from me in a developmentally appropriate fashion or leave to chance how the child is given the information?

When someone has not told me the truth, how has that affected the relationship with that person?

More generally, how does a lie or secret affect my ability or anyone's ability to trust, moving forward?

The message is not for the caregiver to spill indiscriminately horrific or violent details that will ultimately traumatize the child and secondarily traumatize the caregiver. Remember: Keep it simple, keep it short, keep it honest, within reason.

Themes from "Truth and the Big Dinner" regarding "Truth," the little girl.

1. "Truth" was concerned about her "self-image," as she was found looking at herself in the mirror, wanting to look as good as the other girls in the family.
2. Family gatherings are important to Truth. She cherishes the family-system.
3. Truth is concerned about her missing mother long before she discovers the "truth."
4. Feelings of disappointment and betrayal surface. Even with this disappointment, Truth becomes excited about little things that mean a lot, like the ice cream maker.
5. When Truth first asked, ""I wonder how long it's going to be before my mom comes over"—the silence was evidence that the parents and caregivers did not know what to say in response. Should they tell her the truth or make up a falsehood
6. Telling the truth can be uncomfortable at times, but it is best to be honest, using age-appropriate communication.

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Questions for caregivers of teenagers, using Truth and The Big Dinner story

1.Can you think of a time when you really wanted to do something with a parent and you had to change your plans? How did it make you feel? What made you feel better?
2. What are some ways that Truth can feel close to her mom even though she is not there? (hint: phone, writing, video conference, visits)
3. Auntie Lou Lou admitted to Truth that the family did not tell Truth about her mom because they were afraid it might hurt Truth. What ways could Truth be informed about her mom without expressing all of the details of the arrest and subsequent incarceration?
4. If you could rewrite Truth's

story during the big dinner, how would the story unfold? How would it be different? What would " the truth" look like?

Resources and Summaries.

See also:
https://www.mystoryandme.com

My Notes:

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