



Jamie's Big Visit

Grownup Timeout, Prison Visits and a Parent's Incarceration
Avon Hart-Johnson Publications, LLC.
and in collaboration with DC Project Connect



By: Avon Hart-Johnson, PhD

Illustrations by Andy Hoang

STORY TIME BIG TOPIC SERIES: WHEN A PARENT GOES TO TIME OUT [PRISON]

Avon Hart-Johnson, PhD

Subject: Teaching children how to identify,
process, and express emotions related to loss

ABSTRACT

Children of incarcerated parents are considered invisible victims largely because they are the least to be understood among those impacted by mass incarceration. According to Vanderbilt University, children can feel the same type of emotions that adults experience when encountering a loss (fear, sadness, grief, stress, embarrassment, and nervousness)ⁱ. Too often, children are the last to be acknowledged as grievers when an absent parent is in prison. Instead of being properly informed, they are sometimes left to make up their own stories. Often their imaginations leave them with fears that are far greater than reality. Consequently, they may worry and act out in a manner that is misunderstood by parents, educators, and community members. Moreover, if the truth has been disguised by adults, the affected children often hear otherwise from friends, peers, relatives, and others, thereby taking on the burdens of hiding the parent's incarceration as a family secret due to stigma and shame. However, children have a right to be told the truth in age appropriate ways. Otherwise, in the absence of truth, when children mature, they may distrust adults who have hidden the truth. Jamie's Big Visit and the associated toolkit provides age-appropriate means for parents, caregivers, community groups and school teachers to discuss parental incarceration. This toolkit explains the continuum of the parent's initial absence through Jamie's chronicled prison visit.

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IMPACTS OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION

Somewhere between 1.5 and 5 million children will experience a parent's incarceration in their lifetime. The exact number is unknown because federal and state corrections agencies do not capture associated data on a regular basis. As such, this number may be even greater. This issue of parental absence due to incarceration can have adverse impacts on children, specifically, they may be at risk for

1. **Emotional Problems:** Acting out, withdrawal, confusion, shame, and feeling abandoned.
2. **Future Intergenerational Incarceration:** The relationship between poor academic performance and school dropout rates among other collateral impacts drives this risk.
3. **Insecure Attachment and Social Bonds:** A lack of secure bonds, or the absence of a nurturing and warm environment with a parent or caregiver may result in poor social relationships and other adverse outcomes.



THE COMMUNITY IMPACT

Studies indicate that some children of incarcerated parents are already at a disadvantage, as they may come from homes where they are food insecure, poor familial relations, and they may not have access to good healthcare, dental care, and other key services that contribute to their wellbeing. These disparities may add to the challenges and strain experienced at home and extend into their classroom environment and communities.



WHY WE CARE?

"Many things can wait. Children Cannot."ⁱⁱ

Community leaders, faith-based organizations, and even lawmakers can play a critical role in helping



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children. By shedding light on this otherwise dark, hidden, and taboo topic, you can begin to illuminate the importance of providing children with holistic support and tools to promote their wellbeing.



THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of parents in prison report visitation with their children. Accordingly, these children are directly impacted by parental imprisonment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some children have been traumatized by seeing their parent(s) arrested and taken away. Others have been told nothing at all about the circumstance. Of the informed children, oftentimes the parents are emotionally unavailable as they become preoccupied with the ensuing crisis of the incarceration through reentry continuum^{iv}. Children usually do not go unscathed during this family system crisis. A child can be devastated without having an outlet to manage or control their fears and anxieties. There is also an impact if nothing is done, such as:

1. Unaddressed Trauma
2. Social "displacements" in home, school, and social environments may result in internalizing and externalizing behaviors and disorders^v
3. Feelings of abandonment, guilt, shame, and social stigma
4. Misunderstood disobedience



HOW TO USE JAMIE'S BIG VISIT AS READ ALOUD BOOK & READ ALONG TOOLKIT

Jamie's Big Visit is designed to be used as a Read Aloud/Read Along book. The act of sitting with children and informing them of age appropriate topics using language that they understand can help them acknowledge and even express important feelings. In our toolkit, we discuss this topic of loss as a learning activity. The goal is to minimize the shame and stigma by introducing loss and grief as the "Big" topic; specifically, through Jamie's Big Visit Workshops. These interactive sessions help children to: a) identify "feeling words" & emotions; b) express emotions in appropriate ways; and c) empathize with others who feel similar emotions in a same or different context.

Contact Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson, HS-BCP to set up a discussion about *train the trainer*, story-time sessions, and learn more about our workshops. For more information on cost and training, contact: Dr. Avon Hart-Johnson (United States)
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DC Project Connect:
www.dcpojectconnect.org
And www.dcpojectconnect.com

ⁱ Vanderbilt University, The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.

ⁱⁱ Visage, J. Waterside school Head of school. Retrieved from <http://ei.yale.edu/real-stories/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Eddy, J. M., Martinez, C. R., & Burraston, B. (2013). Relationship processes and resilience in children with incarcerated parents: VI. A randomized controlled trial of a parent management training program for incarcerated parents: Proximal impacts. *Monographs Of The Society For Research In Child Development*, 78(3), 75-93. doi:10.1111/mono.12022

^{iv} Hart-Johnson, (2014). *The Symbolic Imprisonment of African American Women: A legacy of Mass Incarceration*. Extant Publishing: Washington, DC.

^v Green, M., & Scholes, M. (2004). Education for what? Attachment, culture and society. In M. Green & M. Scholes (Eds.), *Attachment and human survival* (pp. 37-51). London, UK: Karnac.