Earning Trust from Youths with None to Spare

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The incarceration of parents has particularly devastating impact upon the children they leave behind. Children of incarcerated parents experience a range of emotions regarding the loss of their parent, complicated by family, school, and community circumstances. With 1.6 million people currently incarcerated in jail or prison and a total of 5.4 million adults under some form of correctional supervision, there may be as many as 10 million minor children of criminal offenders [Johnston & Carlin 1996]. This number includes children whose parents are presently incarcerated as well as those whose parents were incarcerated at some time in the recent past. Too often, the special needs of these children go unaddressed; further, the social stigma attached to incarceration encourages both children and families to conceal the problem. Given the likely extent of the population of children of incarcerated parents, professionals in all fields will encounter children of prisoners regularly [Johnston 1993]. There is a distinct need for schools, social service, and mental health programs to develop programs that are responsive to the needs of these children, particularly in communities of color, where incarceration rates for men and women are significantly higher than in the general population [United States Department of Justice 1995].

This article explores one program's outreach efforts and programmatic approaches that have encouraged youths enrolled in alternative programs at the middle and high school levels, ages 12 to 16, to self-identify and to participate in support groups for children of incarcerated parents or to be willing to participate following identification by school and program staff.

Effects on Adolescents of Parental Incarceration

Children of incarcerated parents have long been referred to as a "hidden population" [Rosenkrantz & Joshua 1982]. The stigma of parental incarceration makes identification of this group of youth difficult. Family deception and secrecy contribute to the difficulty in the

identification of children of incarcerated parents. Children may be deceived about their parent's incarceration or, even when informed, may be directed by their caregivers to maintain secrecy. [Sack et al. 1976] Secrecy is often prompted by real or perceived threats to the family's well-being [Chaney et al. 1977]. Children of incarcerated parents are often transient, with families frequently moving due to economic circumstances [Sack et al. 1976] or because they are transferred from one caregiver to another [McGowan & Blumenthal, 1978; Woodrow 1992]. Such instability tends to keep them from settling down long enough to form the necessary level of trust to ask for help [Sack et al. 1976; Dressel & Barnhill 1991]. Frequent mobility may place an additional obstacle on working with youths, because they may not remain in a program setting for a long enough period of time to engage in services. Each of these issues compounds the secrecy that surrounds parental incarceration and therefore makes it difficult to identify, assess, and meet the needs of these youths.

Social stigmatization experienced by children of incarcerated parents contributes to a range of reactions on the part of these children. Fritsch and Burkhead [1981] found the children's reactions differed by the gender of the incarcerated parent: "acting out" behavior, (i.e., running away or truancy) was associated with paternal incarceration and "acting in" behavior (i.e. crying, withdrawal) was associated with maternal incarceration. Deception regarding parental imprisonment has been associated with delinquency, aggression, and other negative behavior insofar as it prevents children from working through their feelings [Gabel 1992; Hannon et al. 1984]. Deception has been found to contribute to increased fears and mistrust among children [Hermann-Keeling 1988].

Program Model: Description and Context

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The Youth Advocacy Program

The Youth Advocacy Program (YAP), is one of several programs operated by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA), a private, not-for-profit organization that develops and promotes community-based alternatives to incarceration. CCA operates several programs through offices in Syracuse and New York City. The Syracuse-based YAP offers a range of advocacy, support and youth development opportunities for high risk youths between the ages of 12 and 17 involved in the juvenile justice system and who attend the alternative schools in the Syracuse City School District.

Upon entry into CCA youth programs, students are assessed through a screening process that includes a questionnaire and a brief interview with a staff member. At that time, students are specifically asked about a variety of stress factors that may be present in their lives, including parental incarceration. Assessment is an ongoing process, as additional information is often revealed through program participation. Youths are offered access to a variety of programs that meet their specific needs upon initial assessment, and again as additional needs arise or become apparent. Such services may include mentoring, participation in a peer education program, classroom sessions, or job training.

A critical element of the design of services is the encouragement of youths to participate in more than one YAP project. To that end, service referrals are frequently made directly to other CCA programs, including CHOICES, an HIV/AIDS prevention, education and peer leadership training program, Self-Development, a work apprenticeship program, JUMP, a juvenile mentoring program and Community Corps, a community service-learning program. Youth Advocacy also provides case planning, court advocacy, and community supervision for youths in the juvenile justice system, as an alternative to placement. YAP is staffed by a Director of Youth

Services and each specific project area has one or more staff specialists assigned to the individual project. YAP also has access to resources through other CCA programs, including a substance abuse evaluator and a court advocate. These varied programs share in common a strong, "unconditional" commitment to youths.

This philosophy, along with the variety of program options, promotes trust and credulity among high-risk youths that in turn allows them to feel comfortable in disclosing what otherwise would be a family secret—the incarceration of a parent. CCA developed the Children of Incarcerated Parents (ChIPs) support group as an additional, specific response to the reality that more than 50% of the youths in CCA programs identified themselves during initial screening as having experienced the incarceration of one or both parents, and an additional 30% were subsequently identified during the course of the program year.

Client Characteristics

Youths who participate in YAP services mirror the demographic characteristics of students who attend the Beard Alternative School. New York State Education Department 1994 -1995 data show the following characteristics for Beard School students. Two-thirds (67%) of the student population is African American, with 30% Caucasian and the balance other minority (Latino and Native American). In contrast, the school district's population as a whole is 53% Caucasian. Performance data from 1995-1996 shows a 61% attendance rate in Beard and a 40% dropout rate, compared to a 91% annual attendance rate and 5% dropout rate for the district at large. The school also had an 82% suspension rate compared to a suspension rate of 10% for the district. Eighty-seven percent of Beard students are eligible for free lunch. Without exception students in Beard School tested below students in other Syracuse district schools in all tested subject matter.

In the 1996/97 school year, CCA's YAP programs served 128 youths whose socio-demographic characteristics are as follows: average age of 14.1; 64% male, 36% female; and 74% African-American, 5% Latino, 5% biracial, 14% Caucasian, 1% Native American, and 1% Asian. At least 90% of the students come from low income families and 80% were identified as having had a parent or guardian who has been incarcerated. With regard to the youths' juvenile justice involvement, 78% reported involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Program Approaches to Building Trust

CCA has made use of opportunities available through diverse funding sources to address a range of youth needs, including offering positive opportunities, community support and involvement and adult participation and commitment as mentors, job supervisors, and community supervisors. Program design has considered several key factors related to outreach and recruitment, staffing considerations and program philosophy and purposes. YAP programs use an open approach to intake. There are no a priori exclusionary criteria: youths are generally welcome to participate in YAP programs regardless of school, social service, or criminal justice system history.

Considerable effort is made to establish rapport with the youths. This requires attention to methods of outreach and staffing considerations. As CCA programs are co-located in Beard School, they are directly on-site and available to the youths every school day. Youths are encouraged to come into CCA's office and some program activities are scheduled in that setting. It is very important to adapt program settings to be accessible, attractive and responsive to an inner city, minority, youthful population. The office environment is very conducive for the youths and contributes to building bonds between youths and program staff. All CCA staff, whether direct program or other, have been trained to be friendly and attentive to youths and office support staff soon come to know youths by name. Also attracting youths is office decor

that is reflective of a multi-cultural client group, with information and posters reflective of aspects of African American and Latino culture and brochures and information available in Spanish and English. Food and drink are available for youths, increasing comfort and recognizing that teenagers are hungry.

Building trust and rapport also requires attentiveness to staffing considerations, specifically cultural competence. YAP staff is a small multi-ethnic team including African Americans, Latinos and Caucasian. The gender of staff has generally been balanced between men and women. Two of the staff who work with the support group were themselves children of incarcerated parents, and are willing to discuss that fact with youths in the ChIPs program.

Youths are referred to CCA by school staff, law guardians[1], peers and self-referral. In addition, Beard School has integrated CCA's Community Corps service-learning program directly into the school curriculum and all 7th and 9th graders must participate in this class. All youths entering CCA programs undergo a comprehensive psycho-social assessment designed to understand their individual and family circumstances. In addition to interviewing the youth, the program interviews parent and reviews school and juvenile justice records. The assessment is regarded as the first opportunity to establish rapport with the youth. It also has been one occasion for staff to learn of the incarceration of a parent. Because the question of parental incarceration is included in the assessment as one of many difficult questions, and because we actually do take the time to ask the question at all, more than half of the youths who have parental incarceration will identify themselves during the initial assessment interview. The assessment is also viewed as

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1In New York State counsel assigned to represent juveniles in a variety of family court proceedings are referred to as law guardians.

an opportunity to provide information to the youth about CCA programs and purposes and to offer assistance in addressing parental needs.

However, for reasons identified in the literature review, at least half of the youths are reluctant to discuss their parent's incarceration and their own juvenile justice involvement. The assessment process is, by design, considered to be an ongoing, collaborative process. Staff meet regularly to discuss individual students. Networking with the community centers that also serve the youths takes place on an informal basis, with additional efforts underway through a federally funded juvenile gun violence prevention initiative to create a more formal system of integrated case management.

Finally, program design recognizes that youths and their families are likely to respond in a variety of ways to what may be perceived as power and authority in service delivery. Program staff expect their credibility to be tested and challenged. Continuing to reach out to youths in the face of these challenges is critical to earning trust among youths that have little trust to spare

ChIPS Support: Meeting the Needs of Adolescent Children of Incarcerated Parents

Program assessment practices and the program options that build trust and meet a wide variety of needs have enabled CCA to determine that 80% of the youths enrolled in CCA programs have a parent who is presently or was recently incarcerated. Despite the prevalence of this problem, there were no services available in the Syracuse area that specifically address issues of parental incarceration. Previous programs, including a program to help families visit inmates

incarcerated in distant state prisons and a program to help maintain ties between women incarcerated in the local jail facility[2] and their children, are defunct due to loss of funding.

With support from a local foundation (the MONY Foundation) and the cooperation of the Syracuse City School District, CCA established psychoeducational support groups for children of incarcerated parents. The experience in recruiting youths to participate in these groups underscores the obstacles created by the social stigma and family deception surrounding this issue. Despite an awareness that 80% of youths served by CCA were children of incarcerated parents, initial support group recruitment efforts were unsuccessful. Posters placed throughout the building and staff presentations to classes resulted in the referral or self-identification of only 10 students. Furthermore, efforts to enlist parent support and interest by initially requiring parental permission to participate resulted in delays and contributed to poor results during early recruitment efforts. Only one of the first ten parents contacted returned the permission form: in several cases the letters were returned as undeliverable. Two caregivers refused to allow students to participate: in one case, the student reported that her aunt refused permission because she did not want anyone involved in their "personal" business; in the other, the previously incarcerated father stated that he wanted to get on with life, denying the children's problems.

To counter these obstacles, a new strategy was developed based upon the practices currently in place in the school system for other support groups.[3] In the redesign of ChIPs,

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2In New York State, persons convicted of felony-level offenses and sentenced to more than one year of incarceration must serve their sentences in state correctional facilities. All misdemeanor sentences and felony sentences of one year or less are served in local facilities.

3 For example, the District sponsors a support group, "Banana Splits," for children of divorced, separated, or otherwise fragmented families. Students can participate in this group without parental permission and information disclosed in the group is deemed confidential.

parental permission was no longer required, although no student whose parent objected to the program was permitted to attend. New posters were designed that highlighted the availability of food at the groups. Students were recruited through direct presentations to CCA's Learn and Serve classes and were also asked to encourage their friends to attend. Guidance counselors and social workers at the school continued to serve as referral sources, and teachers directly referred children in younger grades.

ChIPS offered three support groups at Beard School during the spring of 1997, with up to 10 youths in each group, and an open enrollment process that allowed students to enter at any point in the group. One group was all seventh grade boys, one was all seventh grade girls, and the third was a mixed gender group of younger students. The girls' group continued during the Summer.

Curriculum Materials

ChIPS presently uses a curriculum under development by CCA that covers issues of isolation, self-esteem, and shame; helps children to develop ways to deal with other children and adults regarding their absent parent; helps youths to make positive choices, set goals, and develop support systems; addresses substance abuse; and promotes an understanding of the corrections system (visiting, contact, parole, release) and legal issues. The support groups are psychoeducational in nature. Each session is developed through an interactive process, which typically begins with informal discussion during a shared lunch. As the youths talk about issues of immediate importance, the facilitators use the curriculum manual as a resource to steer the discussion in a solution-focused manner. For example, if a group member shared concerns about a parent who has been recently arrested, a section in the manual on "Understanding the Criminal Justice System" would help address both specific factual issues such as visiting guidelines at the

local facility and empowerment issues such as learning how to research one's own specific questions about a parent's case. In response to shame and stigma as an ongoing issues, the manual would help educate the youths about the prevalence of parental incarceration both from a larger statistical point of view and from the context of the numbers of youths enrolled in the particular schools. Discussion about the effects of racism on incarceration rates in the neighborhoods where the youths reside is also encouraged, with a focus on finding positive solutions both as individuals and as members of the community. To this end, youths who are not already enrolled in CCA programs are encouraged to participate in the other programs offered by the agency. These other programs allow ChIPs students a range of positive opportunities, and provide adult support, and recognition. Where CCA programs cannot meet youths' needs, referrals are made to appropriate services such as psychological counseling.

Group Formation

Experiences during the program's first year resulted in the formation of two support groups, with a third group due to be added soon. Middle-school age girls and boys participate in gender-specific groups. The groups meet weekly in a classroom located in an isolated wing that allows for a reasonable degree of privacy for the students. The sessions are scheduled during a combined lunch and physical education time slot, allowing for an hour-long session.

The mixed sex group is no longer used because the facilitators found that when boys and girls were in the support group together, there tended to be more game playing and less focused discussion. The current groups have also been limited in enrollment to a maximum of eight youths, with enrollment accepted only during the first few sessions, or upon consultation with the group. Any more than eight youths, it was found, made it difficult for individuals to speak

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openly about the situations in their lives. In addition, once the students developed a sense of trust and safety with each other, it became too disruptive to the dynamics of the group to allow new students to join. Since in some cases the new student might be an integrated part of the peer group, however, there can be new members added with permission of the existing members.

Despite the student familiarity and trust in CCA due to previous associations, most of the first sessions with each group are spent reassuring the students that the sessions will remain confidential. Students in each group have expressed the strong desire to ensure that no one outside the group will know the specifics of their family situations. Staff have noticed this desire for confidentiality to carry over into other programs, with youths being very careful in casual conversations to avoid revealing the nature of the support group.

An important aspect to initial sessions is the development of safety in the group. In order to create a safe environment, careful attention is paid to staffing, and the development and enforcing of ground rules. The groups are each co-facilitated by members of the youth staff, with careful attention to matching appropriate staff members to the groups. The facilitation teams are racially diverse and are matched to the groups by gender. In each case, at least one of the team members was also the child of an incarcerated parent during his or her lifetime. During the initial sessions, the groups generate a list of ground rules for themselves, with guidance from the facilitators. All groups are expected to agree to basic rules including: confidentiality; no "put-downs;" one person speaks at a time; speaking from one's own experience only; and everyone has the right to pass. These basic rules are not given out in a list, but rather are developed through a brainstorming discussion by the group. For example, this year's group of girls added "no cussing" and "stay seated if you are angry" to the list for their group.

Discussions during the sessions have revealed a range of issues including multiple placements, juvenile delinquency among the students and their siblings, and a high level of family violence. Every student in the program has expressed relief at being able to talk about the issue of parental incarceration, and for those teens who witnessed their parents' arrest, ChIPs has generally been the first time they were able to express their feelings of fear, grief, and anger that they experienced during that traumatic event.

The Trust Building Process: Case Examples

Carmen

Carmen[4] is a 13-year-old female who has had multiple out-of-home placements, including several stays at the local juvenile detention facility. She was a latecomer to the group, entering after the group had already met several times. The first time she came to the support group, she exhibited a lack of trust so strong that she refused to taste the pizza being shared for lunch because she did not eat food from unfamiliar restaurants. The facilitators expressed concern about the fact that she would not have an opportunity to eat lunch and asked her to let them know which sorts of food she was willing to eat so that future meals could take her needs into account. Great care was taken by the facilitators to ensure that Carmen felt included, and the group welcomed her by briefly sharing their names, and their opinions of the group. As the session progressed and Carmen's primary needs were addressed, she became visibly more comfortable. Within an hour, she had not only eaten the pizza, but had also shared specific details of a current court case for which she needed assistance.

Tyrone

4These examples have been changed slightly for the purpose of disguising identities only.

Youths in the support groups frequently do not know where their fathers are located and or the specifics of the crime committed by their parents. An extreme case is that of Tyrone, whose father had been incarcerated since he was very young. Tyrone had always assumed that his sister's death was the reason for the incarceration, and only learned in the group, from his brother who was also participating, that this was not the case. Although it is unusual for the information about a missing parent to be so readily available, it is not unusual to find that once the student has indicated a desire to know more about the circumstances of the missing parent, it becomes easier for the youth to also ask for information from family and friends, sometimes with the aid of a CCA staff member.

Kirsten

Kirsten had been present when her mother was arrested on drug charges. Appearing considerably older than 14, Kirsten was also detained briefly in the local jail. Released to her grandmother, she was not allowed to discuss the experience, and was also discouraged from talking about it when her mother was released. Months later, during a ChIPs meeting, she described the arrest in excruciating detail, actually jumping out of her chair to act out some of the actions which had been taken by the police. At the end of her story, she sat back in her chair and thanked the facilitator who was present for the session, stating that this was her first chance to tell her story.

Conclusion

Meeting the needs of children of incarcerated parents requires a multifaceted, collaborative approach. Using information available from program and school staff, networking across agencies, and providing tangible benefits (pizza, field trips) are all necessary for breaking through the wall of secrecy that isolates these children and their families. Strong community advocacy, standing up for and with children and their families in courts, schools, government

and community agencies are key to building the trust necessary to address the myriad issues facing children of incarcerated parents.

Schools and community programs need to develop creative and flexible approaches to working with these children. A first step in the identification of children of incarcerated parents is including questions regarding parental incarceration in all assessment tools, recognizing that these are the very same youths who present themselves at alternative schools and other secondary prevention and intervention programs designed for youths at risk. Using existing youth development services as a starting point (mentoring, job training, peer educator programs) has proven to be a mechanism for developing trust among youths sufficient to allow them to then disclose the specifics of their family situations. Programs must stress confidentiality to provide the safety needed for meaningful dialogue in the groups.

New efforts at working with the children's current caregivers are underway, using the same model which worked with the youths. Materials are in the development stages to assist the caregivers in understanding the special needs of children of incarcerated parents. Parents will be contacted first under the auspices of CCA's other programs, with discussion of parental incarceration introduced once the relationship between the agency and the caregiver has also developed a level of trust.