When parents are incarcerated or have temporarily lost custody of their children, other adults need to act in the parenting role. If there is any chance of positive reunification, coordination between the caregiver and the parent is critical. Although there are differences between the situations of caregivers caring for children of incarcerated parents and those caring for children of abusive and neglectful parents, a number of the issues are the same.

Literature has identified common living arrangements when parents are incarcerated.
- A child whose father is imprisoned usually lives with the mother
- A child whose mother is imprisoned is much more likely to live with grandparents, other relatives, or to be placed with foster care agencies
- Children of incarcerated women are more than five times more likely to enter the foster care system than children whose male parents were in prison.

A study of children one year after they were brought to the attention by the child welfare system found that one quarter were no longer in the system. Of those still involved, 58% were in non-kin foster homes, 32% were in kinship care foster homes, and 9% were in group homes. “Non-kin foster homes were more common than other settings regardless of children’s ages, ethnicities, or types of abuse, with kinship care being the second most common placement type” (Dowd, p. 1).

Living arrangements for children who have been identified as abused or neglected is not terribly reliable. Much of the care is kinship care, and a majority of such care is informal. The Census Bureau estimates that 2.5 million children live in homes that are not foster homes but in which neither parent is present. The Department of Health and Human Services has estimated that about 125,000 children live in kinship foster care arrangements. The National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) reports that more than a half million children were placed in the care of relatives after social services involvement.

Children placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect often have mental representations of their mothers as not very “benevolent” and as giving a lot of punishment at the beginning of the separation. They see the foster parent in the opposite way—as being benevolent and not as punishing. That image changes over time, however. So caregivers should expect somewhat of a honeymoon period, but allow the children to develop more positive views of their parents.

Children need attachment figures. They need to feel that there is an adult in their lives who will care for them and be there when they need something. Children will most often develop attachments with the caregiver, and that is healthy. If that caregiver was part of the child’s life before the separation, the child’s adjustment will probably be smoother. And if the caregiver will continue to be there after the parent is reunited with the children, that is also very positive. In many cases, though, a continuous relationship is not possible. It is very important for these caregivers to build a caring and supportive relationship with the child while also supporting the children’s relationship with the parent.
Suggestions for Working with Caregivers 2009

Caregivers need to understand that children who develop an attachment to them do not need to give up the attachment to the parent. Children can be attached to multiple people. The caregiver does not need to compete with the absent parent. In fact, the child will adjust better if all caregiver relationships are maintained.

Caregivers and parents who coordinate efforts and try to provide similar values and childrearing approaches will have a much stronger impact on the child than those who provide conflicting and competing approaches. Offering the Parenting Piece by Piece program to both parents and caregivers is one way to increase the coordination and consistency of the childrearing environment.

Positive characteristics of caregivers that will support the children’s well-being and facilitate a positive reunion in the future:

- Caregivers build a strong relationship with the children.
- Caregivers establish and maintain a relationship with the child’s parents and extended family.
- Regular communication between the caregiver and the parent includes updates about the children’s well-being and activities.
- The parent-caregiver relationship builds on strengths of the parents rather than focusing on the weaknesses.
- Caregivers allow frequent contact between the parent and children.
- Caregivers are involved with the children’s daily activities.
- Caregivers maintain a positive outlook and believe that they, the parent, and the children will get through the separation and have a good outcome.

References:


General Hints

- The program is likely to be most helpful for kinship care and other semi-formal situations. In many cases, patterns of parenting are very similar across family members, so some of the issues for the identified parents may apply to the caregivers as well, so working with both groups will increase the effectiveness of the program. Foster parents, on the other hand, may get other training, so this program may be too basic for them.

- Single sessions (especially Optional Session C) of Parenting Piece by Piece or the entire curriculum can be offered to caregivers. Leaders should consider their level of access to the caregivers, the availability of leaders to facilitate the sessions, and the likelihood of caregivers attending. When recruiting caregivers, consider the need to motivate them to come as well as removing obstacles that stand in the way of their attendance.

- Unlike some other audiences for this curriculum, this group is likely to need child care during the sessions. Explore ways to provide care that will be trusted and will not require too much expense on the part of the caregivers.

- It is important to recognize that some caregivers hold very negative attitudes about the parent and may be happy that the children are separated from him or her. It may be helpful to share information about the importance of parent-caregiver communication with those caregivers. Focusing on child well-being may help to convince the caregiver to participate. Recruitment techniques will be necessary with this group that are not as important when working with mandated or incarcerated audiences.

- Remember to respect the confidentiality of the participants. When working with the parents and caregivers separately, each may try to find out information about the other by quizzing the facilitator. Be sure to tell them that you cannot share information outside of the sessions, and assure them that you will keep their information to yourself as well.

- Consider the use of individual journals. They may or may not make sense with a caregiver audience.

Adaptations for using the curriculum with incarcerated audiences

Session 1: Know your Own Strengths

- You will not need to deal with the anger and resentment about coming to the program unless the caregivers are mandated to attend. You may need to deal with their anger at the parent, however. More of those feelings are dealt with in Optional Session C.

- When parents introduce themselves, you may want to use the outline for the introduction in Optional Session C instead of the one included in Session 1.

- It would be possible to focus on both the strengths of the parent attending the program AND the strengths of the parent who does not have custody. It would be very helpful if the caregiver could start to identify the positive aspects of that parent’s childrearing skills. After the Bragging and Self-Praise activity, caregivers could practice praising the parent using the guidelines of self-praise. They also could produce advertisements for both themselves and the other parent. (Try to discourage them from doing too many direct comparisons between themselves and other parent. Maintain the principle of self-comparison.)

- If you choose to use evaluation forms for this audience, it would be appropriate to use PEPPER. Contact Judith Myers-Walls for the forms.
Session 2: Ready, Set, Grow!

- This session should work for caregivers with very few adaptations. You might want to add some ideas about how to share some of the information about the child’s development with the non-custodial parent.
- Suggest that the caregivers might want to make the Play Kits available for the parents and children to use when they visit, if possible.

Session 3: Stress and Balance

- Most of this session will work as written.
- You could address the specific stressors that that parent and children experience while separated from each other. Use them as some examples, but keep in mind that more attention is paid to these issues in Optional Session C.

Session 4: Talking, Listening, Communicating

- Most of this session will work as written.
- Include the handout on parent-child communication from a distance. The caregiver can either support or block many of those ideas, so sharing the handout with both sides may increase the likelihood that the approaches will be used effectively.

Session 5: Conflict Happens—Managing Effectively

- Most of this session will work as written, but examples regarding parent-caregiver conflict might be helpful to include.
- When talking about anger triggers, it would be helpful to ask participants to identify the anger triggers of the non-custodial parent. Help the caregivers explore ways to avoid pulling the parent’s triggers.

Session 6: Discipline with Smiles, Not Tears

- Most of this session will work as written.
- When talking about the most important rules, it could be helpful to ask the participants how the rules differ when they have the children and when the parent has the children. How can they make the rules more consistent?

Session 7: Dealing with Misbehavior

- Most of this session will work as written.
- Again, it might be good to discuss consistency of rules between the caregiver and the parent. Stress how it can be helpful for both of them to work together to try to find the causes of misbehavior and how they can work together to solve the problems more efficiently.
Session 8: Finding Riches in Your Community

- Most of this session will work as written.
- If the parents were not mandated to attend, you may want to change the celebration of the program completion to be less formal. All participants are likely to appreciate the completion certificate, however.

Optional Sessions

- It would be possible to offer only Optional Sessions A and C to caregivers. Keep in mind that the sessions assume some background from the other sessions, but many participants may do fine without that background.
- Although a number of the other sessions may be too basic for foster parents who receive other training as part of their position, these two sessions cover material they have not covered in other sessions. Discuss the appropriateness with foster parent supervisors.

Optional Session C: Co-Parenting from a Distance

- This session was created with this audience in mind. It can be inserted at different places, but may work well between sessions 7 and 8.

Optional Session A: Attachment

- Attachment is a very important issue in the caregiver-parent relationship. It is critical for children to have a strong attachment figure when they are away from their parents, and it is also very important for them to maintain the relationship with their parents, especially if a goal is to reunite them. This session would be good to include, therefore.
- This session is recommended to be inserted between sessions 4 and 5.