



MENTORING FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review

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SUMMARY

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This review examines research on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents. The review is organized around four questions:

1. What is the demonstrated effectiveness of mentoring for children of incarcerated parents?
2. What factors condition or shape the effectiveness of mentoring for this population?
3. What are the intervening processes that are most important in linking mentoring to outcomes for children of incarcerated parents?
4. To what extent have efforts to provide mentoring to this population reached and engaged targeted youth, been implemented with high quality, and been adopted and sustained by host organizations and settings?

Rigorous research on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents is scarce and only just starting to lay a foundation for understanding the impact of mentoring for this population. This research is even more limited with respect to clarifying the conditions and processes that may be required for optimizing benefits to youth. Combining the available evidence on mentoring children of incarcerated parents with the larger body of literature on the nature and experiences of this youth population, however, suggests a number of noteworthy possibilities with regard to each of the above questions.

These include:

- Program-arranged mentoring for the children of incarcerated parents has the potential to contribute to observable improvements in their behavior, relationships, and their emotional well-being.
- Positive outcomes from mentoring may be more evident while the youth are actively engaged with their mentors, although sustaining the length of the mentoring relationship for the children of incarcerated parents is apparently difficult for programs.
- The benefits of mentoring for this population may be influenced by the child's capacity for trust and resilience, the strength of the relationship between child and the incarcerated caregiver, and whether this person is the child's biological parent.
- Processes involving positive youth development, resilience and coping skills, and self-esteem may be instrumental as pathways through which mentoring is beneficial for children of incarcerated parents.
- As with mentoring programs in general, and those serving higher-risk youth in particular, it is critically important to provide mentors with high-quality pre-match training and ongoing support from agency staff.

The review concludes with insights and recommendations for practice based on currently available knowledge. These recommendations include taking a "networked" approach to supporting the child with an emphasis on parent involvement, providing more robust mentor training, emphasizing youth development principles in relationship activities, and planning for extending these relationships or transitioning the youth from one mentor to another as a way of sustaining program impacts over longer periods of time.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the impact of incarceration on the children of prisoners. As with most familial and environmental circumstances, the extent to which the incarceration affects a child varies across individuals and situations and having an incarcerated parent does not predetermine a child's outcomes. However, in general, incarceration of a parent(s) may increase the likelihood that a child experiences poverty, disruption in the family, and even a sense of shame stemming from the stigma others may attribute to the imprisonment of a parent.¹ In addition, these children may have already experienced a number of risk factors that contributed to the incarceration of the parent(s), so the incarceration itself may enhance the negative impact the child is facing. The research on this youth population has pointed to negative outcomes for the children that are psychological, academic, and behavioral. A recent systematic review, though, found the incarceration of a parent to be related to a higher likelihood of antisocial behavior on the part of the children, but not a higher likelihood of involvement with substances, mental health issues, or academic failure.²

Disruption in the family, particularly the loss or lack of a stable adult role model, is one of the biggest challenges facing these children, potentially contributing to negative outcomes. It is, therefore, not surprising that policy makers and practitioners have proposed mentoring as a potential intervention for this group of young people. The research pointing to the protective influence of supportive, positive, nonparental adults, particularly for youth experiencing individual and environmental risk,^{3, 4, 5, 6} is at least suggestive that providing adult mentors for the children of incarcerated parents may be an effective strategy to improve psychological, academic, and behavioral outcomes. This review focuses on mentoring as a potential intervention for children of incarcerated parents and addresses the following specific questions:

- What is the demonstrated effectiveness of mentoring for children of parents or caregivers who are incarcerated?
- To what extent do the benefits of mentoring for children of incarcerated parents appear likely to be contingent on such considerations as the different characteristics of the youth involved and/or their mentors, the circumstances surrounding the parent or caregiver's incarceration, and the programmatic practices or approaches that are employed?
- What intervening pathways or variables appear likely to be most important in linking mentoring to beneficial outcomes for children of incarcerated parents?
- To what extent have efforts to provide mentoring for children of incarcerated parents reached and engaged this population, achieved high quality implementation, and been adopted and sustained by host organizations and settings? What factors predict better reach, implementation, and adoption/sustainability?

In this review, *children of incarcerated parents* are defined as young people who have experienced the incarceration of at least one of their parents or primary caregivers while growing up. The impact of the disruption to the family may last beyond the actual period of imprisonment and because

the risk factors that contributed to the parent’s incarceration may still be evident even after the parent’s re-entry into the community and to the family. For these reasons, the designation *children of incarcerated parents* is considered to continue to apply to children of previously incarcerated parents or caregivers until they reach 18 years of age. Historically, there was more concern about the impact of incarceration in state or federal prisons, because the period of imprisonment lasts for one year or longer (whereas incarceration in local jails may last for only a short period of time). Accordingly, the earliest mentoring projects that focused strategically on serving the children of incarcerated parents limited their focus to children with parents in these types of correctional settings. Over time, though, programs serving this population of young people, along with funding for those programs, have expanded the scope of services to include children with parents in local jails, and even children from households where any adult (i.e., not just a parent, but potentially an extended family member or a close family friend living with the family) has been incarcerated or from households in neighborhoods that are disproportionately affected by incarceration. Throughout this review, care will be taken to note the scope of the research evidence with regard to the specific types of youth served by the programs targeting *children of incarcerated parents*.

This review considers mentoring to be relationships and activities that take place between youth (i.e., mentees) and older or more experienced persons (i.e., mentors) who are acting in a non-professional helping capacity – whether through a program or more informally – to provide support that benefits one or more areas of the young person’s development (for further detail, see [What is Mentoring?](#)).

A systematic literature search for research on mentoring children of incarcerated parents was carried out to identify articles, book chapters, and evaluation reports with findings pertinent to one or more of the central questions for this review. This search identified a total of only nine (9) studies that met these criteria. The review of available research for each question is preceded by a background section that helps frame the question by considering relevant findings from the broader body of research on the effects of parental incarceration on children.

1. What are the Effects of Mentoring on Children of Incarcerated Parents?

BACKGROUND

A recent meta-analysis looked specifically at the question of whether having an incarcerated parent increased the likelihood that children would engage in antisocial behavior, which is broader than a focus on just illegal behaviors. This meta-analysis examined results from 40 different studies, for a combined sample size of 7,374 children with incarcerated parents and

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37,325 comparison children across 50 study samples.² Although many of the studies included were methodologically weak and did not enable the researchers to conclude that parental incarceration actually *caused* antisocial behavior among the children, the more rigorous studies reviewed indicated

that having an incarcerated parent was associated with an estimated 10% increase in risk of antisocial behavior among the children.

Families facing incarceration are often exposed to many individual and environmental risk factors, and research has established that over and above the disadvantage and dysfunction these families experience, the removal and incarceration of the parent has an additional and independent aggravating influence on the child.^{7,8} In an analysis of data from the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), parental incarceration was found to have a stronger association with negative child behavior outcomes (i.e., problem behaviors and developmental delays) than divorce or parental separation.⁹ Using data from 11 waves of the Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers found that negative educational outcomes (i.e., truancy and dropout) were more likely for youth that experienced the incarceration of any adult member of the household (i.e., not just the parent).¹⁰ Finally, in an event history analysis using data on prison and jail incarceration of the mother and school record data on their children, it was found that children with an incarcerated mother were more likely to drop out of high school during years when their mothers were in prison, compared with those children with mothers who were only incarcerated once during the 8.5 year study period for a short time (one week or less) in a local jail.¹¹ This suggests that the extent of the incarceration matters, as being in prison is associated with the mother being absent from the home for longer periods of time and at a location farther away from the home (which may negatively impact the ability of the child and parent to maintain contact during the period of incarceration).

What is it about the experience of having an incarcerated parent that matters for their children? In one exploratory study, researchers worked closely with a group of 14 adolescents with incarcerated parents to identify a set of themes characterizing the needs of this population of young people. Participating youth expressed concerns that their caregivers struggled with meeting basic needs for the family and might not be able to support the youth in achieving goals, including those related to educational and employment aspirations. These youth also expressed the importance of making sure that programs addressed the behavioral and psychological needs of the youth while also making sure the parents had the support they needed for an effective re-entry, as well as the importance of exposing children of incarcerated parents to interesting places and helping them with personal growth for their future. It is not hard to envision that mentoring could address many of what these youth say would be key issues.

RESEARCH

What does the research say about whether mentoring is beneficial for children of incarcerated parents? There are four studies, in particular, all focused on program-arranged mentoring, that are relevant in considering this question.

Researchers from ICF International conducted a randomized-control trial of the Amachi Texas program as implemented by BBBS agencies, between 2008 and 2010, to assess the impact of one-to-one mentoring on youth outcomes for children with an incarcerated parent and/or relative, including attitudes toward school, social competence, prosocial behaviors, relationships with family and caring adults, and hopes for the future. In this study, 272 eligible children (ages 7-13) were randomly assigned to either be matched with a mentor or to join a wait list for 18 months.¹² Key findings reported in this study provide some evidence that mentoring can be effective for children of incarcerated parents. The first follow-up results, captured 6 months after the start of the mentoring

relationship, indicated that there were significant improvements in the relationship the child had with his/her family, as well as in the child's feelings of self worth and sense of future, compared to children in the control group. There were not, however, any differences between mentored and non-mentored youth at 6 months in academic or school related outcomes. In longer-term follow-ups (i.e., at 12 and 18 months), mentored youth also reported feeling a stronger connection to their family, school and community, compared to the control group youth.

There were, however, challenges in recruiting and obtaining consent from parents and children—in fact, twice as many parents/caregivers and their children declined to participate in the evaluation as did consent to participate. In addition, there was substantial attrition from the study sample across the 18 months that the researchers intended to follow the matches. To begin with, only 72% of the children in the mentoring group and 84% of the children in the control group completed the baseline survey. At 6 months, 78% of children in the mentoring group and 85% of the children in the control group who provided baseline data also completed the follow-up survey. A further concern is that there was much more attrition from the study sample by the end of the study in the mentored group; less than half of the mentored children who completed the baseline survey participated in the 18-month follow-up survey, an attrition rate 24% higher than in the control group. It could be,

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for example, that the researchers were more successful in collecting follow-up data from youth in the control group who had relatively poor outcomes, thus leading to a misleadingly favorable estimate of effects of receiving mentoring. Additionally, program retention data showed that although 81% of the mentoring matches were still active at 6 months, only 54% of the matches were still active at 12 months—matches that were no longer active at these points in time included those where the youth relocated or dropped out of the program, as well as matches that closed early for other reasons. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether any effort was made to obtain data at follow-up assessments from youth whose matches had closed, which would be a key requirement for obtaining an unbiased estimate of program effects. In view of these various considerations, the results of the study should be considered at best only suggestive.

In another study, data from a local Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) initiative in Indiana in which 63% of the youth served were children of incarcerated parents were compared with data from the Fragile Families (FF) and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally-representative sample of about 5,000 children living in urban areas and born between 1998 and 2000.¹³ Just more than 50% of the FF sample were children of incarcerated parents; with propensity score matching,ⁱ these data were used to construct a comparison group for the sample of children of incarcerated parents served in the BBBS program. The research examined three outcomes (delinquency, academic cheating, and sadness) and found that for the children of incarcerated parents taking part in the mentoring program, there were significant reductions in all three outcomes 6 months after the start of the relationship.

i When evaluating social interventions, the ideal study design would involve a randomized experiment or well-planned quasi-experiment that results in the creation of an equivalent control group or comparison group. When such a study design is not possible, propensity score matching is a statistical approach that can be used to create the highest-quality possible comparison group from a larger group that is not engaged in the evaluation.

After 12 months into the relationship, the reductions in sadness and academic cheating were still evident. Comparisons of the mentored youth to the FF sample of non-mentored youth, however, generally failed to reveal significant differences on any of the three outcome measures at either 6- or 12-months (the one difference that did reach significance favored the comparison group: academic cheating at 12-months).

Again methodological challenges in this study call for the cautious interpretation of these results. The youth in the FF data (comparison group) were predominately 8-9 years old (younger than when most youth start to engage in delinquent behaviors) and reported lower levels of delinquency and cheating behaviors at baseline than the youth served in the BBBS program, making their use as a comparison group a concern. In addition, like the Amachi Texas evaluation, the children served in the BBBS program experienced 50% attrition at the 12-month follow-up survey. With these caveats in mind, the results of this study are only suggestive that mentoring can make a difference for children of incarcerated parents.

Two other recent studies that did not use a randomized-control design found mixed evidence on the effects of mentoring for children of incarcerated parents. In a study of a BBBS program in Wisconsin, researchers found no statistically significant evidence of positive effects for those youth being mentored, although caregivers reported fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors for those children actively engaged with their mentors.¹⁴ In a study examining the impact of mentoring for at-risk youth served by BBBS and other agencies in the State of Washington, researchers compared estimated program effects on several outcomes for children with and without parent report of a close family member (i.e., not specifically a parent) who was either incarcerated or had frequent problems with the law. Significant differences were found for three of the several outcomes that were examined—depressive symptoms, parental trust, and the number of outcomes showing negative change. Whereas beneficial program effects were evident for each of these outcomes among children without parent report of family member incarceration/legal problems, this was not the case for those who were reported to have such a family member.¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

1. Available research suggests that program-arranged mentoring has the capacity to contribute to observable improvements for children of incarcerated parents in their behavior, relationships, and their emotional well-being; however, the scope and rigor of the available evidence are insufficient to draw strong conclusions.

2. What Factors Condition or Influence the Effectiveness of Mentoring for Children of Incarcerated Parents?

BACKGROUND

It is important to recognize that children with incarcerated parents are not equally at risk for negative outcomes. Indeed, many of these young people live with the non-incarcerated parent and that parent is able to provide a healthy environment and effective parental management of their children. Similarly, there is reason to expect that mentoring could differ in its effects on children of

incarcerated parents depending on a variety of considerations. For instance, drawing on qualitative research outside of the realm of mentoring, points to the possible importance of the following: (a) the length of time that the parent has been out of the home, with findings suggesting more recent incarceration to be more disruptive; (b) the amount of contact between child and incarcerated parent; (c) the extent to which children are experiencing trust issues or feelings of loss and abandonment in the wake of a parent's incarceration; (d) the degree of support caregivers offer to the objective for children to get positive adult role models; (e) the potential disruption that may occur if reintegration of the parent takes place; and (f) the feelings the child has toward the incarcerated parent (which may involve ambivalent feelings stemming from the person's involvement in criminal behavior).¹⁶

For some children of incarcerated parents, contact and involvement with the parents is much more limited. Some programs serve youth where the primary modes of contact with the parents is through phone calls and letters.¹⁷ In addition, by the time they are involved in mentoring programs, the children may have been in the custody of nonparental caregivers for more than two years.¹⁷ What's more, those caregivers often note that because incarcerated parents have patterns of criminal activity predating the current imprisonment, the caregivers feel the children should continue to be in their custody.¹⁷ In one study, though, the youth were found to be more likely to drop out of high school if they did not return to the custody of their mother after the mother is released from prison.¹¹

To summarize, there is reason to believe that a range of factors could be important in shaping the effectiveness of mentoring for children of incarcerated parents. Despite this possibility, our literature search revealed only one study that reported findings with potential relevance to this question. The findings of this study are reviewed briefly below.

RESEARCH

In an evaluation of a BBBS program in Connecticut specializing in serving the children of incarcerated parents, the researchers assessed the youth using the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS) at intake and 13 months later. The study found no evidence of positive changes that could be attributed to mentoring. It was found, however, that those children most likely to continue in a mentor-mentee match for at least 12 months were those with evidence of personal strengths.¹⁸ There was also some suggestive evidence that staff ratings of "relationship closeness and the emotional bond between the mentor and mentee" were associated with strength scores on the BERS at 7 and 13 months.¹⁸ This research, however, has significant methodological limitations. Of the 166 youth, between the ages of 5 and 18 years, recruited at study intake, for example, only 111 children were still involved in the evaluation at 7 months and only 65 were still in the study at 13 months (39% of those beginning the study at intake). Those retained in the evaluation, furthermore, were significantly different from those who were not on the BERS, scoring higher on strengths and lower on problem behaviors at the start of the study. The researchers also noted that the youth served by this particular program may have had relatively less pronounced profiles of risk relative to the broader population of children of incarcerated parents.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The existing literature suggests that the effects of mentoring should not be assumed to be similar across children of incarcerated parents with varying personal characteristics and life experiences (for example, capacity for trust and resilience, strength of relationship between

child and incarcerated parent, and whether caregiver is a biological parent or not); available research is extremely limited, however, and insufficient to provide a basis for even preliminary conclusions about these possibilities.

2. As is often common in programs serving higher risk youth, program practices that address critical needs within the family and that serve to strengthen the relationship between the parent and the child, are theoretically promising for enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring as a support strategy for children of incarcerated parents; none, however, have yet benefitted from systematic investigations of their effectiveness.
3. For youth with incarcerated parents, positive benefits of program-arranged mentoring have been more evident while they are actively engaged with their mentors, and the published research does not provide any evidence that the benefits of mentoring are sustained over the longer-term if the relationship has ended.

3. What Intervening Processes are Most Important in Linking Mentoring to Outcomes for Children of Incarcerated Parents?

BACKGROUND

A wide range of processes could potentially be important in linking mentoring to outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. There is some evidence, for example, that improvements in the incarcerated parents' own parenting behaviors can lead to improvements in the behavior of their children.¹⁹ Similarly, improvements in the parent-child relationship have been indicated to be one pathway through which mentoring can facilitate various beneficial outcomes for youth in evaluations not focused on children of incarcerated parents.²⁰

The literature on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents also points indirectly to intervening processes that could be important

in leading to positive outcomes for youth. One of these processes is the development of a strong support network for the youth that would include a caseworker, the parents or caregivers, and the mentor. In one study, for instance, researchers conducted a small number of interviews and focus groups with children of incarcerated parents, staff, caregivers, and mentors. Staff and mentors reported that children do well (i.e., they do better) when there is a strong support network of which the mentor is a part.¹⁶ Such a strong support network should likely involve attending to the needs of the caregivers as well. When caregivers report their needs are being met, like when they are connected to appropriate services, they are also more likely to report more positive feelings about how the child is doing.²¹

The second intervening process is the self-esteem of the youth. Qualitative studies have reported findings suggesting that children of incarcerated parents feel better about themselves when matched with a mentor.¹⁶ In one evaluation of a mentoring program serving this population of young

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people, 80% of 35 youth surveyed about the benefits of the mentoring relationship reported that they agreed or strongly agreed with the following characterizations of their mentoring relationship: the youth were able to turn to the mentor for guidance, to discuss problems, and to discuss the future.¹⁹ Also, at least 80% of the respondents reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that their mentors helped to: challenge the youth to succeed; get the youth to devote more time and effort toward academic pursuits; and help the youth feel good about themselves. In the Amachi Texas evaluation described above, children with incarcerated parents who had been matched with a mentor reported higher self-esteem than their non-mentored counterparts.¹² This result was detected initially at 6 months and was found to also be significant at 18 months after the start of the match.

RESEARCH

There was only one study identified in our search that reported findings directly pertinent to intervening processes through which mentoring may promote positive outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. Already described earlier in this review, the quasi-experimental study of a BBBS program serving this youth population found that whether the youth self-identified as a mentee (a “Little”) appeared to be salient.¹³ In this study, the researcher found that children with an incarcerated parent initially expressed a higher commitment to the role of mentee, and with that commitment came higher expectations, as reported by the youth, about how they would benefit from the mentoring experience. Closer to the one-year anniversary of the mentor-mentee relationship, children of incarcerated parents (COIP) reported lower commitments to the role of mentee than their non-COIP counterparts in the program. The researcher speculated that this was a response to the anticipated ending of the mentoring relationship, and may be a reason why the positive gains (i.e., lower levels of delinquency and academic cheating) found at 6 months into the relationship had eroded by the 12-month mark.

CONCLUSIONS

1. For the children of incarcerated parents from backgrounds characterized by the highest levels of environmental and personal risk, the existing literature suggests that the full potential of the mentoring relationship to lead to positive youth outcomes is most likely to be realized when the mentor becomes integrated with the array of services and supports necessary to equip the child’s household to thrive; to date, however, there is no research that has explicitly examined these causal processes.
2. The disruptions that children experience to their relationships with incarcerated parents are known to shape the perceptions these children have of themselves and their own personal identity; as such, the ways in which these children come to understand what it means to be a mentee and the potential expectations they may have about the value of the relationship with their mentor appears important for understanding how mentoring might contribute to positive youth outcomes; the degree to which this type of pathway is important in linking mentoring to positive outcomes for these youth, however, has not yet been systematically studied.

4. Have Mentoring Supports and Services for Children with Incarcerated Parents Reached and Engaged Targeted Youth, been Implemented with High Quality, and been Adopted and Sustained?

BACKGROUND

Reach and engagement: Research on children with incarcerated parents has pointed to the complexities of the circumstances from which these youth come.¹⁶ How long the parent has been incarcerated may matter. How much contact the parent has with the child during the period of incarceration may matter. The capacity the youth has for trusting adults may matter. The level of support that these youth have from their caregivers may matter. The potential disruption to the household that occurs when the incarcerated parent is released from prison may matter. The way the child feels toward the incarcerated parent may matter. Programs that take these factors into account may be in a better position to effectively engage this population of youth in meaningful relationships with mentors.

The literature on mentoring children of incarcerated parents, and more generally, high-risk youth, point to some of the key challenges in serving this population. Challenges range from identifying youth that meet the criteria as *children of incarcerated parents*, to securing the approval from caregivers and/or the incarcerated parents for the participation of their children in the mentoring programs, to facilitating regular and consistent contact between the mentor and the mentee, to having the match last at least 12 months or until there is a positive, planned closure of the mentor-mentee relationship.^{12, 13, 14} Early research on Amachi pointed to the critical importance of supporting the match to increase the likelihood that the duration of the relationship was at least one year.²² Other evaluations of mentoring programs for this population of children have noted the challenges that present when caregivers are transient and communication is lost unexpectedly.¹⁹

One qualitative study described above found that children of incarcerated parents were more likely to engage with programs that featured staff that could be characterized as “empathetic, caring, nonjudgmental, and authentic.”²³ These youth also noted it would be optimal for programs to assist youth in being able to visit the incarcerated parent and, more generally, to stay in touch with the parent. Finally, these youth also noted that programs should be prepared to address a number of problems that the youth are facing and assist the youth to prepare for a more positive future.

Quality of implementation: In a previously referenced study that examined different levels of individual and environmental risk for youth in BBBS and other mentoring programs in the State of Washington, findings suggested that tailoring training and staff support for mentors to the needs and life circumstances of their mentees could be important for increasing the likelihood that youth will realize the greatest benefits from participating in mentoring.¹⁵ While none of the research on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents considers the differential effect of the various program practices, some of the published evaluations queried staff members regarding the aspects of the programs that they felt were most important. Training for mentors is often perceived as

critical. The recommended content of such training includes information on the unique challenges that this population of young people bring to the mentoring relationship.¹² Much has been debated about whether mentors should know that the parents are incarcerated. There is also the perspective that mentors should be prepared to work with this population and should be recruited carefully to assess whether they bring the right background and attitudes to work well with these youth. Finally, the importance of providing mentors with sufficient match support has also been emphasized.¹² Collectively, these considerations suggest a variety of factors that may be important both in defining high-quality implementation in the context of providing mentoring to children of incarcerated parents and for ensuring that it takes place.

Adoption and sustainability: Evaluations of different types of services and supports for children of incarcerated parents have generally not addressed questions relating to the sustainability of the programs involved.

RESEARCH

In the research examined in this review, there is little attention to reaching and engaging targeted youth. A number of the studies included in this review also made note of the common struggles that programs faced in sustaining the matches for 12 months or longer. While the literature on mentoring children of incarcerated parents acknowledged the importance of quality of program implementation, there were no studies found for this review that examined the nature and quality of training or ongoing support of mentors.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The literature on mentoring for children with incarcerated parents has helped to shine a light on the complexities that mentoring programs may need to address to effectively serve this population; these include the needs and interests of the children, which may be evident at times in a reluctance to enter into a trusting relationship with an adult mentor, and the needs of the caregivers and their interest/concerns related to having a child in a mentoring program; however, research that addresses the possible influence of these factors with respect to engaging children with incarcerated parents is not currently available.
2. Sustaining the length of the mentoring relationship for young persons with incarcerated parents is apparently difficult for programs serving this population.
3. As has been indicated for mentoring programs in general, and those serving higher-risk youth in particular, it may be critically important for match retention to provide mentors with high-quality pre-match training and ongoing support by agency staff; research, however, has not examined this possibility.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

(Mike Garringer, MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership)

Providing mentors to children of incarcerated parents has been one of the more prominent trends in the youth mentoring field over the past decade, with substantial federal and private investment in services that target these youth during recruitment or offer additional enhanced forms of mentoring to meet the additional needs and risks of this population. Programs such as Amachi have expanded over this time to be truly national in scope, while federal agencies such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have rightly noted that prevention and intervention services aimed at these youth might play a pivotal role in reducing future crime and breaking multigenerational cycles of incarceration and family dysfunction.

But for all the investment in this type of programming, there remains, as seen in this review, little in the way of detailed, evidence-based information about how mentoring might serve this population best. In many cases, this is not for a lack of effort. As noted in the review, there have been several attempts to study the mentoring provided these youth over the years. Unfortunately, these research efforts have been undermined to some degree by issues of attrition (too many youth ending their participation in the study causing issues with the usefulness of the results) or from an emphasis on outcomes over the nuances of service delivery. Simply put, the field has struggled to measure the impact of these programs, let alone test the types of programmatic details that would help today's practitioners design more effective programs for children with an incarcerated parent.

But in spite of these research limitations, there are several things that practitioners should keep in mind in designing programs intended to serve this population well, or at the very least, to ensure that children of incarcerated parents in traditional programs get the extra support they need and deserve.

1. A NETWORKED APPROACH THAT DEEPLY INVOLVES PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS IS A GOOD START

One of the key design considerations that emerges from the review of the literature is that the parents or caretakers of children of incarcerated parents must be involved in these services at a meaningful level. This includes both the parent who is raising the child during the period of incarceration, as well as the incarcerated parent. There are many reasons for programs establishing early and frequent communication with these parents and guardians and for engaging them in the program services over time:

- **Parents are instrumental in getting youth enrolled in the program and participating in mentoring meetings.** Many of the studies referenced in this review had difficulty getting eligible children of incarcerated parents enrolled in the program. Parents or guardians of these youth may be reluctant to involve their child in an additional program in what may be a very turbulent and uncertain time in their lives. If the program targets *only* children of incarcerated parents, they may feel some stigma attached to the program or may be distrustful of any service provider looking to act upon their family's newfound circumstance. Clear communication with parents about program goals, support structures, and services can help ease fears and maximize the percentage of parents who take advantage of the

opportunity to find a mentor for their child. Programs may get greater buy-in from parents and guardians if they can carefully explain the role of the mentor, the boundaries and limitations of that relationship, and openly acknowledge the concerns caregivers may have about the mentor being presented as a substitute for the incarcerated parent. As in other instances where mentoring is offered in the sudden absence of a parent (such as for youth who have a deployed military parent), programs should strive to understand the unique concerns, fears, and circumstances of each family and offer honest and transparent explanations of the services and the ways that a mentor can be particularly beneficial at this time. Having the testimony or direct involvement of former mentees and families in the program might also help convince parents that this will be a positive experience for the child.

- **Parents may be in need of other services and supports that the program can broker or provide directly.** One of the other clear themes that emerges in the studies to date is that these families are often thrown into chaos when a parent or other family member is incarcerated. The loss of income, housing, child care, and domestic structure that comes with an incarceration can leave a family with some very basic and serious needs that must be addressed if something like a mentoring program is to be of much help. Youth in one study mentioned in this review identified *47 distinct areas of need* that their family had as a result of a parent being incarcerated. This volume can obviously be overwhelming for both families and for service providers. Multi-service agencies or mentoring programs that have deep ties to other community service providers may be best equipped to handle this kind of “case management” approach, where there is an attempt to provide more holistic support to the family in addition to a mentor for their child. This type of deeper support to families can lay the foundation for the mentoring relationship.
- **Parents can help facilitate visits between the child and the incarcerated parent.** As noted in the research review, the relationship and amount of contact that children of incarcerated parents have with their incarcerated parent can play a big part in how well they adapt to this new circumstance in life. There are some indications that strengthening those relationships, and increasing the frequency of contact if possible, can help mitigate some of the negative feelings (loss of trust, abandonment, hopelessness, etc.) that can accompany losing a parent’s daily presence in this way. Of course, it should be noted that the appropriateness of this ongoing contact will be dependent on a variety of factors, such as the nature of the crimes that led to incarceration and the tenor of the child’s pre-incarceration relationship with the parent. But in general, a mentor may find their work a bit easier if the relationship between the youth and their absent parent is strengthened in some way. Programs should consider working with staff at correctional facilities to provide critical messages about the program to incarcerated parents and prepare them for the wide range of emotions and concerns they may have when hearing their children talk about their mentors.

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- **Parents can ensure their child’s ongoing participation and share valuable information with the mentor.** As noted earlier, the lives of children of incarcerated parents can be complicated and transitory depending on how the incarceration has impacted their day-to-day life. Mentors and program coordinators will need to make sure that they stay in solid contact with parents, not to just arrange mentor-mentee outings but also to make sure that they don’t abandon the program altogether. Note that many of the studies referenced in this review had substantial attrition over just the first year of mentoring services, with the number of participants declining steadily after 6 months. Programs serving these children may want to check in more frequently with parents than is recommended in standards such as the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*[™]. And mentors may want to emphasize more and deeper communication as well. It may be especially helpful to mentors of children of incarcerated parents to hear more frequent updates about how the youth is coping, any new changes in behavior, or other developments that can be addressed by the mentor.
- **Parents control how the program will handle release and re-entry as it relates to the mentoring relationship.** It is entirely possible that a mentor will still be involved with a child when that child’s incarcerated parent is released. This, obviously, is a situation that will need to be handled delicately and well by the program. Each family will have different needs and circumstances around their family member’s release and re-entry into the community. Programs should work closely with the parent and appropriate system representatives (e.g., parole officers) to determine what impact, if any, the release will have on the mentoring relationship. For some matches, the release might not change a thing; for others, it may represent a big change in the family’s immediate plans (such as moving to a new area) that might force the end of the match. Programs should do some scenario planning to set formal policies around how to handle this unique event when it happens to their matches. But they should always be willing to listen to the parent or guardian’s wishes as to how to make this transition work best for the child and the mentor. They should also give a voice to the child and work with the mentee to identify concerns they have about the release and/or reunification. A meeting where the mentor, mentee, and mentoring program staff member meet to discuss this transition may be helpful in surfacing previously unspoken issues or concerns. And they will certainly want to provide ongoing training to mentors on how to handle this situation and appropriately respond to any number of issues and scenarios that can arise with the child or the parents post-release.

2. A POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH WILL GET MENTORS GOING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

The background research noted in this review offers some hints as to the types of activities mentors should engage in and the types of outcomes that programs may want to aim for. These youth are often awash in a range of negative emotions and thoughts and doubting their family and their own future as a result of losing a parent to incarceration. The role of mentors here should be to help the child build resiliency and coping skills, form a positive self-identity, and gain a sense of hopefulness for the future. The “5 Cs” of positive youth development (PYD) offer some guidance here: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion. Activities that address these areas may be especially helpful in supporting children of incarcerated parents and building their

resiliency in the face of tough circumstances. It's worth noting that there have been several studies, including the *Role of Risk* study cited in this review, suggesting that mentors can help alleviate depressive symptoms. And a good mentoring relationship should also be *fun* for everyone involved. So hopefully mentors to children of incarcerated parents can really emphasize activities that build confidence, positive feelings, and a positive sense of self, while also having some fun and being a source of happiness in what might otherwise be a difficult time for the child's life.

One mentoring activity that might be beneficial to youth is a mapping exercise in which they identify other important, caring adults in their lives. As noted above, the feelings of abandonment and uncertainty that can come from parental incarceration can be intense. Taking stock of assets, and of the web of caring adults who are still around for them, can help alleviate some of these feelings and allow youth to take a full view of the support available to them. Depending on the child's age, this type of mapping could be even more impactful if it incorporates goals the youth may have in different areas of life and if it identifies caring adults or other supports that can keep them moving forward toward these goals.

3. TRAINING FOR MENTORS IN TRUST-BUILDING AND COMMUNICATING WITH THE FAMILY IS A MUST

Another important theme that emerges in the research on children of incarcerated parents is the difficulty that they may have forming a trusting relationship with a mentor (or any service provider for that matter). As noted previously, they may be feeling abandoned or deceived by the incarcerated parent, or they may also be dealing with the effects of trauma or abuse, depending on the nature of their parent's crimes. Needless to say, these scenarios would leave most children feeling distrustful of adults, especially adults who come from the new array of service providers and "system people" that have now been thrust into their lives. Mentors will need significant training before being matched, and ongoing support after, if they are to gain the mentee's trust and break through any walls the youth may have constructed. This training should include scenarios and role plays that give mentors the opportunity to practice new skills, techniques, and conversation starters.

Another key aspect of this training is emphasizing that mentors must honor their commitments to the program and the child. They must take advantage of the supports offered by program staff and seek help when they are struggling with the relationship or feeling like this work is not for them. Simply put, these youth have already been through a lot and may be struggling with many issues of trust, abandonment, and isolation. Missing meetings with a mentee, or blowing off the relationship altogether, is simply not an option here. This type of mentor abandonment can harm any child, but can be particularly devastating for a youth who has a parent behind bars. Training must emphasize mentor commitment, as well as mentor supports, in an effort to minimize this issue.

As noted earlier, communicating with the mentee's parent or guardian is also critical here, so programs should ensure that mentor training also offers opportunities to practice talking to parents and when to seek support from the staff when difficulties arise in communicating with parents.

4. PROGRAMS MAY WANT TO THINK ABOUT HOW TO EXTEND THE BENEFITS OF THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE

While obviously not comprehensive at this point, there is some concern in looking at the outcomes of previous research on mentoring for children of incarcerated parents in terms of the diminishing impact of the mentoring relationships over time. There were several studies noted here that found some good impacts in the shorter term (e.g., six months into the relationship) only to have those gains wash away as match lengths reached a year or longer. There are many potential reasons for this decline. As noted previously, these evaluations often had many missing participants toward the end of the study, rendering treatment/control comparisons invalid. Youth in the “control” group may have received other services, including mentoring from a different source. And one can imagine that if a significant number of participants were reunited with a released parent that it would impact the results of the evaluation.

But it’s also entirely possible that a mentor is a great short-term boost for children of incarcerated parents, but perhaps not much more. Mentors may be great for quickly offsetting the impact of having an incarcerated parent, a source of joy and stability in a trying time. But it may be that over time the needs of the family or the cumulative impact of the missing parent simply is more than one mentor can address. Clearly more research is needed before making any sweeping generalization about the ideal length of these matches, but it’s worth considering that for this population mentors are perhaps best used as a targeted, short-term form of support.

That begs the question of how programs can produce more long-term impact for children of incarcerated parents. One possible solution is to really emphasize more meaningful activities and engagement later in the relationship, giving mentors and youth an increasingly relevant and sophisticated set of activities to do together as the match ages. This issue might also be addressed by innovations in program design. Maybe a team approach offers more long-term mentoring viability, as a network of caring adults step in to support the child, rather than relying solely on one mentor. A youth-initiated mentoring approach might help identify additional mentors that can serve as a “hand off” when the initial match starts to decline. Programs should be creative in thinking about how to extend the impact of what may be, in spite of the desire for long-matches, a short-term intervention.

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