

Coping with the stigma: a family member's perspective

Much of society's concern is focused on the victim of a crime and on the offender. Yet, your life has also been affected, through no fault of your own. In this way, families of offenders are also victims of the crime. You may notice people distancing themselves from you. Some may act as if you are less worthy as a person because of the actions of your incarcerated loved one. You may even find yourself feeling guilty at times, as if what happened is somehow your fault. These attitudes are part of the unfair but common experience of being stigmatized when a family member is incarcerated.

Because of this stigma, you may also endure the burden of isolation that comes with not wanting to share your story, and your loss. When somebody loses their loved one to death, divorce, or military service, it is not kept secret, and they receive sympathy during their grieving. But this type of care and kindness is not so readily available to family members of incarcerated individuals who often feel the need to maintain privacy around their loss. You may be left to grieve alone in the midst of an emotional storm. Perhaps you feel depressed or fearful, confused, angry, hopeless.

The children in your care will also experience their own emotional storm as they try to deal with their multiple losses—not only the loss of their incarcerated parent, but also the loss of the life they once had. Separation from a parent, for any reason, results in stress, sadness, and fear. Separation through imprisonment is even harder to deal with because of the social stigma and the ambiguity—many children are told to maintain secrecy about what has happened and they are left alone to grieve the loss of a parent who is alive but physically and emotionally absent. Children may feel abandoned and might believe that they are unlovable—“if my dad loved me, he’d be with me, not in jail.” Children may feel guilty, not understanding that it was mom or dad who did something wrong. They may think it is somehow their fault and wonder, “If only I had been a better child, would this have happened?” Due to the social stigma, they may be told to keep a family secret—the secret of incarceration is a big burden for a small child.

Exploring the stigma of incarceration: an exercise

In this 20 minute activity, we will give further consideration to the stigma of incarceration and its effects. Participants should begin by reading "*Coping with the stigma: a family member's perspective*" on the front side of this handout.

1. Choose a role from the list below.

- a grandparent; your son/ daughter is in prison; you're caring for the kids
- a sibling; your brother/sister is in prison; you're caring for the kids
- the spouse/ partner of an incarcerated person; you're caring for the kids
- an incarcerated parent
- a child of an incarcerated parent
- a teacher with a child of an incarcerated parent in your care/classroom

2. Take a couple of minutes to answer the questions below from the perspective of whatever role you have chosen; try to really put yourself in his or her place.

- Who would you want to know about the incarceration?
- Who would you not want to know?
- Why OR Why not?
- What factors affect your decision?

3. Joining with 2 partners to form a small group of 3 people, take a couple of minutes each to share your reactions to this exercise.

- What did you notice?
- What feelings did you have?
- Is there any awareness or insight you'd like to share?

4. Think about how you can help reduce stigma in your classroom. What is one thing you could do?