

Helping Children/Adolescents Avoid Crime & Cope Emotionally With The Incarceration Of A Parent

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Abstract

Crime is a part of every ethnic group and culture’s experience in America. Children and adolescent take part in criminal activities for a number of reasons. At some point, they make an arbitrary decision to break the law as a result buying into various stereotypes. There are specific family interventions and mental health counseling strategies that can help children/adolescents avoid criminal activities.

Introduction

Youth crime and violence have been a problem since the Victorian days (some 200 years ago). Crime is a part of every ethnic group and culture’s experience in America. It is held that a total of 45 percent of all crimes in American are committed by persons under the age of 21 and that 25 percent all homicides are committed by youth ages 14-17.

Children and adolescents take part in criminal activities for a number of reasons. At some point, they make an arbitrary decision to break the law as a result buying into various stereotypes. Adult interview James (age 45) stated, ***“When I was a teen, boredom and peer pressure led me to start stealing and skipping school. It was definitely a decision that I made.”*** The move toward crime by children/adolescents is also as a result of their feeling marginalized in society and possibly being victims of abuse/neglect at some point. Lastly, criminal activity tends to follow children/adolescents who participate in sexual intercourse early in life (age 11), early experimentation with alcoholic beverages (age 11) and early exposure to gun violence (age 12).

In America, the recent years have witnessed a push and focus to address concepts that strengthen families. Specifically, due to their higher level of dysfunction, families that feature the presence of adolescents have gained the attention of government and school officials. When exposed to ongoing family dysfunction, children/adolescents may struggle to do well in life (see chart #1) and become involved in criminal activities (delinquent behaviors).

Chart #1 Effect of Dysfunctional Family on Children/Adolescents

Unable to Care for Self	Moderate to Severe Mental Health Issues	Addictions/Drug Abuse
Rebellion Against Authority	Aggressiveness and Bullying	Mixed Feelings of Love
Sex Offences/Pedophilia	Marginal Healthy Relationships	Isolation and Anxiety
Bouts of Depression	Speech Problems/Disorder	Distrust of Others
Juvenile Delinquency	Academic Struggles	Low Self-esteem
Self-centered	Inadequate Self-discipline	Abusive Teen Dating

In the United States, crime statistics that are reported to the police are published annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Law officials segment crimes into categories of violent and property. Violent crimes comprise homicide, forcible rape, robbery and assault. Property crimes consist of burglary, larceny/theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson. The crime rate as reported by the media is a combination of violent and property crime.

Simmons (2000) and Mumola (2008) reported the following regarding crime in America.

1. Since 1964, the U.S. crime rate has increased by as much as 350 percent.
2. In 2007 over 11 million crimes were reported.
3. Since peaking in the early 1990s, crime has been decreasing year by year.
4. Compared with other countries, America has the highest incarceration rate in the world.
5. In 2006, a record 7 million people were behind bars, on probation or on parole.
6. In federal prison, 57 percent of those incarcerated were sentenced for drug offenses.
7. In local jails, almost a million of those incarcerated committed nonviolent crimes.
8. Black males in the United States were sentenced at a rate of 10.4 percent, compared to 2.4 percent of Hispanic males and 1.2 percent of White males.
9. Due to discriminatory sentencing, Blacks and Latinos receive longer sentences and spend more time in jail than their White counterparts for similar crimes and criminal records.
10. A total of 1.5 million children nationwide have incarcerated parents and another 10 million have had a parent incarcerated at some point during their lives.
11. It is estimated that nationwide, 93 percent of prisoners are male, 80 percent of incarcerated women have 2 children and 56 percent of male prisoners have 2 children.
12. Children are present nearly 20 percent of the time when a parent is arrested and the children are between ages 3-6.
13. Prior to incarceration, 44 percent of fathers and 68 percent of mothers lived with their children.
14. It is believed that 70 percent of parents in state prison and 55 percent in federal prison never graduated from high school.
15. The majority of incarcerated parents were charged with a drug related crime.

There are several strategies for decreasing dysfunction within the home (see chart #2). The regulating of leisure time, awareness, employment/cash, restorative justice and community based interventions are solutions to youth participating in criminal activities.

Chart #2 Strategies for Decreasing Family Dysfunction

Everyone Display Empathy	Show Appropriate Understanding/Sensitivity
Refuse to Tolerate Abusive Behaviors	Establish Adequate Household Boundaries
Respect Each Gender’s Role and Age	Avoid the Presence of Dogma and Chaos
Ensure Unconditional Love	Immediately Address Ridicule & Disrespect
Encourage Emotional Tolerance	Watch for Social Isolation
Avoid Issues of Under/Over Protectiveness	Promote Usage of Caring Words
Consistently Promote Values	Fulfill Promises and Goals

Participants & Methodology

For this study, there were 10 children/adolescents and five adults interviewed. They all lived in the greater Flint, MI area. The gender makeup for the children/adolescents was six males and four females, with their ages range from 12 to 17 years old. The ethnicities included two Hispanic Americans, four African Americans and four Caucasian Americans. The gender makeup for the adult interviewees was three males and two females ranging in age from 30 to 60 years old with ethnicities consisting of two African Americans and three Caucasian Americans.

A qualitative methods study was utilized to examine the participant’s childhood and adult experiences as it relates to crime. With the help of face-to-face interviews, this study uncovered meaningful data regarding mental health symptoms, expectations, etc.

The participants were asked typical intake and pre-screening questions such as age and socioeconomic status. During the interview, they all were asked the same open-ended questions regarding their experiences. They were asked approximately 20 questions that ranged from “How do you define crime” and “What is the cause of crime” to “Who influences you the most” and “What type of discipline is used in your home.” Their responses generated qualitative data.

Data Collection

The data collection process utilized standard qualitative tools. The participants’ verbal responses to the interview questions became the raw data, with each response given equal weight and transcribed verbatim. In addition, the researchers’ reflections were collected in an attempt to identify the essence of experiences, themes and clusters.

Literature Review

Kumpfer (2010) reported that not only is it costly, but family dysfunction is the leading contributor to negative behaviors among adolescents. Other factors are peer influence, poor parenting skills and lack of parental involvement. These and other factors can ignite unhealthy behaviors like substance abuse, delinquency-criminal behavior, and early or unprotected sex. Kumpfer offered a number of approaches (see chart #3) to family interventions which proved to be effective in strengthening family systems and preventing family violence and behavioral or mental health problems in youth.

Specifically, parenting interventions and efforts that address problem areas in a meeting format and with a focus on problem solving, yields outstanding results. As well, efforts to explore positive feelings by family members from a strengths base is very promising. Adult interviewee Mary (age 46) shared the following: ***“I parented in the moment. I knew I had some personal and parenting strengths but could not exercise them all the time. As a single parent, I wanted my children to stay out of trouble and finish high school. It came down to me fighting against the streets and peer pressure for my children’s well being. Sometimes I won, sometimes I didn’t. I only had so much to give.”*** In addition, agencies and school districts that utilize the Strengthening Families Program report that the home-based interventions reduce attendance barriers (e.g., transportation, child care problems), provide opportunities to explore, establish engagement and addresses cultural adaptations (Kumpfer, 2010).

Chart # 3 Successful Family Interventions

Behavioral Parent Training	Family Skills Training	Family Therapy
Modeling Family Structure	In-Home Family Support	Praise for Improvement
Ignoring What Can Be Ignored	Clear Communication	Reducing Coerciveness

Mental Health Issues & Criminal Behavior

Typically, children/adolescents diagnosed with mental health disorders such as Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant disorder and Attention Deficit Hyper-Active Disorder can be helped, thus avoiding possible future criminal activities and side-stepping antisocial behaviors. The stated childhood mental health disorders along with character flaws such as lying, stealing, vandalizing, bullying, and experimenting with drugs can lead to being convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. What is critical for parents and educators to realize and address is the fact that childhood mental health disorders often lead to school violence, incarceration, childhood/teen suicide, higher school dropout rates, etc.

Criminal behavior (also referred to as antisocial behavior) is defined as an overall lack of adherence to the social morals and standards that allow members of a society to coexist peaceably. For children/adolescents the behaviors equate to delinquency that can trigger adulthood arrest, conviction or incarceration. Their poor mental health status, subsequent behaviors, propensity for violence and involvement in criminal activities can be traced back to environment, inconsistent parenting, lack of natural consequences, academic underachievement and genetics.

As a result, at an increasing rate children/adolescents are following in the footsteps of their birth parent, including becoming involved in criminal activities. For some families, there appears to be a cycle of incarceration and a life of crime. In order to break the cycle of incarceration, specific interventions that help the children/adolescents from becoming offending adults must take place. In most communities and instances when a parent is arrested and eventually incarcerated, there is little to no mental health intervention offered to their children that addresses the experienced loss, fear, trauma and abandonment.

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Simmons (2000) reported that children of arrested and incarcerated parents face unique difficulties. Because not much is known in the research about children of incarcerated parents they seem to be falling through the cracks (Reed & Reed, 1997). The responses to their parent’s incarceration can move them towards anxiety, fears, anger, sadness, depression, guilt, school failure, trauma, low esteem, truancy and/or use of alcohol/drugs.

Kolk et al. (2009) researched the experiences of children who have incarcerated/previously incarcerated parents. They coined the children’s experiences as Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD). Adolescent interviewee Charles (age 14) stated, *“When my father got locked up again a few years ago, it shook my world. I really never recovered. It’s like I’m more fearful and I do not try new things anymore. I also lost interest in school and now would rather be by myself.”*

DTD captures the reality of clinical presentations of children/adolescents who have been exposed to dysfunctional family living, chronic interpersonal trauma, interpersonal violence, unsafe environments, maltreatment and inadequate caregiving systems.

To help children/adolescents address their DTD, the emphasis cannot just be on their behaviors. Rather, sufficient focus must be placed on recognizing the presence of interpersonal trauma, lack of safety and developmental disruptions. From a mental health perspective, DTD can look like and plays out as more common mental health disorders (see chart #4).

Chart #4 Traditional Mental Health Symptoms & Developmental Trauma Disorder

Anxiety/Worry	Phobic Fears	ADHD
Oppositional Defiance	Anger/Aggression	Conduct Disorder
Suicidal/Homicidal	Bipolar/Mood Disorder	Reactive Attachment
Separation Anxiety	Panic Attacks	Major Depressive Disorder
Pervasive Developmental Delays	Post Traumatic Disorder	Conduct Disorder

In a study by Spinazzola and the Child Traumatic Stress Network (2005), 78 percent of children involved in the network had been exposed to multiple and prolonged violence and showed signs of poor self-regulation, attention problems, negative self-image, impulsiveness, too much anger, aggression and risk-taking.

For minors of incarcerated/previously incarcerated parents, their level of traumatic stress does not occur in isolation. Rather it appears as co-occurring issues that mirror victimization and other adverse experiences within the school, family, peer group, legal and health areas (see chart #5). The co-occurring issues can intensify without warning and seek to dominate the daily activities and functioning of bright children/adolescents.

Chart # 5 Co-Occurring Issues

School Setting: Poor Attendance, Low Performance, Regular Discipline Problems, Learning Disabilities and Suspensions
Family: Conflict, Avoidance, Passive, Truancy/Running Away, Detachment, Aggression, Defiance and Regular Accusations
Peer Group: Isolation, Deviant Behaviors, Emotional Conflict, Risk-Taking, Poor Judgment, Following and Boredom
Legal: Arrests, Recidivism, Detention, Convictions, Probation, Court Orders, Fines and Out-of-Home Placement
Health: Physical Illness, Digestive Problems, Cardiovascular Problems, Sensory Delays, Headaches and Somatic Complaints

Solutions & Interventions That Address Criminality

Sexton (2010) reported that the family unit and Functional Family Therapy (FFT) have the ability to help families and at-risk adolescents who are involved in the court system. Functional Family Therapy is an outcome-driven prevention/intervention program for youth who have demonstrated a range of maladaptive, acting out behaviors, poor attitudes, inadequate social skills, underdeveloped conflict resolution skills and related issues.

As a solution and intervention, parents and children/adolescents can modify and incorporate concepts of FFT into their daily living (see list below). The modifying of the concepts is the responsibility of the parent and the minor, with each taking an active and personal role in implementing the information.

- 1. Stop Family Cycle of Crime:** At some point, the cycle of crime must be broken. For this to take place, the parent/legal guardian (and minor) should avoid interaction and contact with individuals who participate in illegal activities. The avoidance can protect from unplanned pregnancies, unnecessary peer pressure, crisis/trauma, dependence, poor role-modeling, low motivation, etc.
- 2. Promote School Attendance/Participation:** To ensure learning and development, children must attend school consistently. The recent years have witnessed children/adolescents in some communities having 10 to 30 unexcused school absences each academic year. Parents and legal guardians must be home and active in preparing their child physically (e.g., proper sleep, breakfast), emotionally (e.g., calm, content, confident), and socially (e.g., accepting of others, agreeable, compliant) for the school day.
- 3. Make Good Use of Free Time:** Idle time continues to be the playground of counter-productive behaviors. The engagement in sports, clubs, hobbies and special interest groups is critical to families and minors avoiding criminal activities. Child/adolescents need to be active and must make good use of their time.
- 4. Secure Gainful Employment:** The lack of adequate household income and/or poor financial management can encourage children/adolescents (and adults) to participate in anti-social behaviors that lead to illegal activities. To have success in this area, adults and children need to improve their financial skills, prepare themselves to gain additional “in

demand” employment skills, take advantage of community-based employment resources and network effectively.

- 5. Develop Healthy Relationships:** Interaction and commonality with the wrong crowd can quickly steer adults and children in the wrong direction. To offset this youth should develop healthy relationships. Healthy relationships feature positive support, ongoing inspiration, opportunities to grow as a person, personal identity and exposure to the larger society. For example, 15-year-old interviewee Anthony stated, *“The key to me avoiding criminal activities is to hang around people who have the same aspirations as me. Like my parents and my sister. They provide me with motivation, persistence and dependability. They are always there for me and give me guidance.”*

Unhealthy relationships feature hitting, regular put downs, intimidation, fear, promote isolation and cause discomfort. These types of relationships should be ended immediately.

- 6. Safe and Adequate Housing:** It is understood that the current recession and economic state of America can cause individuals to live in unsafe and inadequate housing. However, it remains the responsibility of the parent/legal guardian (and minors) to make every effort to promote quality living conditions, regardless of where they live. The actual neighborhood or housing is not the problem. Rather, the problems that lead to youth criminal activities are rooted in the philosophies and unmet needs of adults and children/adolescents who live in the community.
- 7. Substance Abuse Avoidance/Education:** The presence of criminal activity by adults and minors usually involves substance abuse (e.g., marijuana, alcoholic beverages, narcotics). This increases the likelihood of anti-social behaviors and problems. For these and other reasons, everyone in the home should make a commitment to avoid illegal substance usage. By means of substance abuse education and information, better decisions can be made and avoidance of criminal activities can take place.
- 8. Address Mental Health Issues:** Adults and children/adolescents can experience abuse/neglect that has a negative effect on their emotions and behaviors (Richardson & McGowan, 2010). One way to address this is to participate in counseling. Counseling can help individuals experience emotional healthiness and promote behavioral changes. Recalling and discussing a history of abuse/neglect is sometimes necessary in order to move forward emotionally and socially.
- 9. Effective Parenting:** With no doubt, effective parenting helps minors avoid participation in criminal activity. It is held that children need parenting efforts that are consistent and attempt to maintain control. For example interviewee 13-year-old Mary reported, *“My parents are not afraid to take things away from me when I step out of line.”* Children also need close supervision, parental rewards and punishments, and parent disapproval of antisocial behavior.

Parenting Styles

Baumrind (1966) reported on Balby's several identified parenting styles (Authoritarian, Permissive, Authoritative and Unattached). In review, the Authoritarian Parenting style attempts to shape, control and evaluate the behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct and an absolute standard. This style of parent discourages the child's autonomy. Rather, it promotes and values obedience, order, and a traditional structure where the child does not argue but takes what the parent says and does what is right. The Permissive Parenting style is nonpunitive, acceptant and affirmative. This style allows children to regulate themselves as much as possible and encourages the child's input in making decisions about rules. The Authoritative Parenting style attempts to direct the child's activities in a rational manner. This style tends to encourage bi-directional discussions regarding conflict and reasoning behind making decisions. The parent is open to hearing the concerns of the child when conformity is not achieved, values autonomy, self-will and disciplined conformity. This style of parenting typically does not build resilience in children. The Unattached Parenting style is very hands-off and distant in nature. The child is allowed to set his/her own boundaries and explore life with very little input from the parents. This is the least effective parenting style.

Chamberlain (2000) reported that better parenting efforts and youth deciding to change are required when the goal is modifying the frequency of youth anti-social behaviors. At the core of Chamberlain's Multi-dimensional Treatment Foster Care model and effective traditional parenting are critical concepts (see chart #6).

Chart #6 Parenting Critical Concepts

Consistent Consequences for Misbehavior	Close Supervision of Youth Whereabouts
Limitation of Contact with Deviant Peers	Positive Interactions of Youth and Caretaker
Improved Parenting Skills	Sufficient and Warm Family Support

El-Sheikh, Hinnant, & Erath (2010) reported on delinquency symptoms in childhood. They documented that the interactions between biology and environment is important for understanding developmental psychopathology processes. Specifically, they focused on marital conflict and its interactions with psychopathology and emotional deregulation.

Their results indicate that understanding children's developmental pathways to adaptive and maladaptive behavior can be explained by marital conflict. They went on to report that destructive marital conflict is associated with childhood avoidance, anger, or impulsive responses. Lastly, their findings yielded information regarding learned negative patterns of physiological, cognitive, and behavioral responding ability that carry over to multiple domains of children's lives.

What we are finding in our private practice counseling sessions and personal lives is the need for effective parenting. Specifically, to address the needs of children/adolescents who are at-risk of criminal activity, it is helpful for parents to integrate nurturing, structure and support within the home. Nurturing refers to presenting effective child-rearing, educational stimulation, goal setting and role-modeling on a regular basis. Structure denotes establishing boundaries, systems,

patterns, guidelines and discipline within the home. Support refers to presenting of regular encouragement, praise, involvement, trust, help, advocacy and validation.

The stated strategies and participation in mental health counseling sessions have a long history of strengthening families and disrupting the cycle of crime. Individual and family counseling is an important member of the helping process because it allows for the expressing of thoughts, feelings, enhances communication, resolve problems and the discovery of coping skills.

Helping Cope Emotionally With Incarceration of a Parent

Reed & Reed (1997) reported that children of incarcerated parents are adversely affected in that the family system is harmed. The temporary and long term loss of a parent due to incarceration can sting a child/adolescents in a deep emotional way. The sting has the ability to penetrate and distract the fundamental belief system, values that are held near and dear to the heart and chemical balance.

To help children/adolescents deal with the incarceration of a parent and avoid future involvement in criminal activity, affective and physiological and attention and behavioral dysregulation needs to take place. Below is a list of problems that the children/adolescents experience and specific interventions that can be used by adults and minors to address the problems (Kolk et al. 2009).

- 1. Modulate, Tolerate and Recover:** Children of incarcerated/previously incarcerated parents often display the inability to modulate. For some reason, they can't calm down, have regular negative moods, present themselves as being hyper, fail to self-soothe at critical times and are given to anger.

To address the stated, it is imperative that there is minimum exposure to interpersonal violence and consistent parenting that protects. As well, it is helpful to ensure that the child/adolescent avoids emotional abuse, is confronted when he/she has a tantrum and learns to tolerate differences. In addition, the child/adolescent needs to be instructed as to how to mobilize and organize things and maintain a routine sleep pattern. Likewise, he/she is in need of consistent healthy meals, proper personal hygiene/elimination and exposure to positive concepts. Lastly, it is beneficial if the child/adolescent experiences soothing and stimulating sounds and develop ability to create systems and process during routine interactions.

- 2. Disturbances in Regulation of Body Functions:** It can be expected that at some point the children/adolescents of an incarcerated parent will experience disrupted sleep, have eating problems, report digestive struggles, have an overall poor response, be given to being stressed and be oversensitive.

To address the above mentioned, it is important that the child/adolescent have consistent healthy meals and proper personal hygiene/elimination. In addition, he/she should learn how to respond to positive touch and feel.

- 3. Awareness of Emotions and Body States:** The children/adolescents often depersonalize and are not aware of their external world. They move toward affective numbing, dissociation, inability to describe their emotions and inadequate communication of their wishes and desires is not healthy.

There are several practical things that can help children/adolescents experience success in their emotions and body states. They should learn to emote, label feelings and identify their emotional triggers. In addition, efforts should be made to be more aware of their surroundings and to experience incidental learning. They should also be encouraged to be observant and to develop good listening skills. Lastly, they should be instructed as to how to perceive, problem solve and resolve conflicts.

- 4. Threats, Misread Danger and Relational Dysregulation:** All children/adolescents have a need to feel safe. In many cases, children/adolescents of incarcerated/previously incarcerated parents have a tainted perception of safety. They can become pre-occupied with the detection of a threat and experience persistent social fears. On a regular basis, they may misread social context, display narrow focus and have inadequate shifts of awareness of surroundings. In addition, they can become pre-occupied with their caregiver and have attachment problems.

There are several remedies for the above mentioned. The removal of threats and intimidators should take place. There should also be efforts to ensure their safety and ongoing instruction on how to identify dangers and the associated cues. It is also helpful to teach the child/adolescent how to protect his/her emotions and experience regular stimulation. He/she should be introduced to positive rhythms and beats and taught the benefits of intentional movement. The child/adolescent should also receive instruction as to how to properly release emotions, manage stress and gain victory over sexual desires.

- 5. Impaired Self-Protection and Thrill Seeking:** The incarceration of a parent can have a lasting impact on a child's/adolescent's sense of self and thrill seeking. The offsprings have a propensity to be subject to risk-taking behaviors, fire starting and misplaced sexuality. They also tend to pursue activities that are not age appropriate, are impulsive and display poor judgment. Lastly, they tend to not follow rules, have poor planning and fail to anticipate consequences.

To address the problem areas, the child/adolescent must experience goal attainment and have meaningful achievement. He/she also needs self-fulfillment, confidence, self-mastery and an array of self-soothing activities such as rocking, singing and writing. The child/adolescent should also learn to set goals, regularly explore his/her personage and be exposed to various cultures.

- 6. Maladaptive Attempts at Self-Soothing/Reactive Self-Harm:** Due to their level of emotional pain, abandonment and embarrassment, children/adolescents of convicts and felons can be given to masturbating, rocking, self-harm and substance abuse. They are also at risk of suicide attempts, cutting or hitting themselves, picking their skin, burning themselves, self-mutilation and other self-injurious behaviors.

To help children/adolescents who struggle in this area, efforts should be made for them to understand their stressors, experience self-love and recognize the dangers of drugs. They should make efforts to experience natural highs and positive thoughts. It is critical that they learn to feel, decide to accept themselves and vent properly. They should experience unconditional love and have regular positive attention from caring adults.

- 7. Sense of Self, Self-Loathing and Trust Issues:** The incarceration of a parent can affect a child's/adolescent's self-worth and personal confidence. It can also cause guilt, worry, damaged feelings and an overall distrust of others. In some situations, it can lead to noncompliance, aggressiveness, shame and poor boundaries.

There are several concepts that can help children/adolescents avoid self-loathing and limited trust. They can be introduced to projects, join a club, organize activities or become task-oriented. They can also decide to become more responsible, seek to avoid disappointment, remain optimistic and secure healthy relationships. Efforts should also be made to manage their negative emotions and respect boundaries.

Conclusion

For the last several years, youth crime and violence has been well documented. The necessary interventions and strategies to aid children and their families in their quest to sidestep criminal activities are available. What needs to take place at this time is a concerted effort by law officials, educators, parents and youth to embrace positive living outcomes, structured and defined outcomes, holistic approaches to problem solving, sensitivity to the unique needs of today's families and community-based support.

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