Creating Safe Spaces for Children of Incarcerated Parents

More than 10 million children in the U.S. have experienced their parent’s incarceration or their parent being under correctional supervision. About 1 in 28 children have an incarcerated parent, making it likely that you will come in contact with children of incarcerated parents. But, you may never know it because these children often remain invisible due to the stigma associated with incarceration. These guiding tips will help you create a safe space where children and families feel comfortable disclosing and expressing their emotions without feeling judged, blamed, or labeled.

- **Assess your values and beliefs about the incarcerated and their families**
- **Examine how your values and beliefs are affecting your approaches and responses**

- **Let children lead the conversation and help them talk about their feelings by asking open-ended questions**
- **Acknowledge how hard it is to be separated from a parent**
- **Don’t ask a question just because you are curious**

- **Use nonjudgmental language, such as a parent who is incarcerated or formerly incarcerated person**
- **Avoid using inmate, offender, convict, prisoner, and criminal to describe a young person’s parent**

- **Let children know that what they share is confidential and share the limits of that confidentiality**
- **If it is necessary to share information, let the child know and get permission when possible**

- **Post the Children of Incarcerated Parents’ Bill of Rights in your office or classroom**
- **This will help families identify you as a safe and supportive person**

To learn more or to get involved, call us at 718-637-6560 or visit www.osborneny.org
Include parental incarceration on intakes and questionnaires given to children and families
By identifying these children you can better meet their needs
Responses may depend on how safe families feel about disclosing

Support the parent-child relationship, which in most cases is in the child’s best interest
Support visits, phone contact, and letter writing

Identify peer groups, counseling, and supportive programs where children can discuss their feelings, ask questions, and share experiences without fear of judgment
Refer to programs dedicated to supporting children of incarcerated parents and families of the incarcerated

Understand that children experience a parent’s incarceration as an ambiguous and disenfranchised loss
Learn about how the criminal justice system works and how incarceration affects children and families

Invite youth and others directly affected by incarceration to speak at your organization or school
Connect with organizations that work with families impacted by incarceration and learn about their programs

The NY Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents (NYCIP)
is a special project of the Osborne Center for Justice Policy and Practice.

Raising awareness, promoting policy and practice change, and building partnerships to ensure that children’s rights are upheld, important relationships maintained, and their potential nurtured during their parent’s involvement in the criminal justice system. For more information, go to http://bit.ly/NYInitiative.

The Children of Incarcerated Parents: A Bill of Rights was developed by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership in 2005: www.sfcipp.org.

For more information about person-first, inclusive language, go to http://bit.ly/WEAREPEOPLE.