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CHECK IT OUT!

Some Resources Including the Voices of Youth Impacted by a Parent's Incarceration:

- I Touch Your Face in My Dreams, Western Prison Project (December 2004).
- Nell Bernstein, All Alone in the World (2005).
- Project WHAT! Resource Guide for Teens (2008).

WELCOME!

This issue discusses Right#2 of the Children of Incarcerated Parents' Bill of Rights: **"I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE ABOUT ME."**

The Importance of Having a Voice

It may be obvious that it's important to have a say in decisions that will affect us— most of us want this and in a democracy, we feel it is our right. However, the voices that often have decisions made for them without consideration of their input are those of children and youth. To be sure, there are times when adults "know best" and need to keep children safe or put them to bed or make sure they eat their vegetables, but particularly when children are separated from their parents, asking for their input is critical. This is particularly at risk of not happening when a young person has a parent who is incarcerated because judgments, stereotypes, assumptions and stigma can override a concern for how the young person feels and what they say they need.

Here are six reasons to include young people whose parents are incarcerated in decisions about their lives:

1. Children need to know that people are listening to them as it helps them to feel valued.
2. If children do not feel respected by people in influential and powerful positions, they will tend to harbor a lack of respect for those individuals, and the systems they represent, in general.
3. Having youth retain their voice gives them at least one method of control in their otherwise chaotic lives.
4. Children, depending on the age, are very aware of what's happening around them. Arrest and incarceration can be a very scary situation for children and choices, in even the smallest details, can help ease the transition in this painful time in their lives
5. Giving children a choice during this difficult time could set them up to lead more confident, hopeful lives in the future.
6. With choices, children are more likely to end up retaining positivity. In many cases, the simple task of asking could end up meaning the difference between foster care/adoption or kinship care or even reunification.

These reasons are written by Makeba Lavan, NY Initiative Youth Development Specialist, who frequently writes for the Newsletter.

Miguel Pacheco: Adult Reflections on Being a Child with an Incarcerated Parent

Today, Miguel Pacheco is 46 years old and an outreach worker for Argus Community, a community based organization in the Bronx providing a variety of services including substance abuse counseling, HIV/AIDS awareness, reentry support for ex-offenders and more. Much of Miguel's outreach is to those within the jails and prisons of this City and State. Miguel describes how 40 years ago, at the impressionable age of 6, he found himself in the same place that many of the 2.4 million children are today: separated from his parent due to incarceration and feeling isolated. In 1968 little Miguel and his 3 siblings (one brother and two sisters) without warning and without explanation found themselves not only separated from their mother, the primary caregiver in the home, but separated from each other. His sisters were taken to some other unknown place. Miguel was moved from the Bronx to Staten Island where he lived with a foster family. "I was in the boondocks of Staten Island for the next near 9 years!" he said. It would be 8 years before he would see his mother again. There were no visits, no word as to why his mother had "abandoned" him and his siblings. Nothing. After 9 long years of "surviving" (as Miguel put it) in the foster care system he was reunited with his mother. By this time he had been reunited with one of his sisters, the other siblings had runaway from foster care. It was Miguel's older brother who ran away from foster care and located their mother. After being reunited with his mother, Miguel maintained his relationship with her until her passing in 1978. Today he wonders what his life would have been like had the disruption to his family not occurred so many years ago, or if he had been given more information and options. Today, he is dedicated to "giving back" and believes that "foster care and the courts should do more to keep a child connected with his mother (parent). No child should be separated without a word or explanation as to why! Every child has the right to be heard!"

To refer a young person ages 14 to 21 to the Youth Advisory Board, please email Makeba Lavan at mlavan@osborneny.org. To contribute stories about visiting an incarcerated parent please email Sarah Insel at sinsel@osborneny.org

GET INVOLVED

Please come to the next NY Initiative Partner Convening on Friday, February 6th from 10am to 12pm. To find out more or to join a Workgroup on Arrest, Visiting, Data/ Research or Mental Health, please contact Will Norris at wnorris@osborneny.org or at 718-637-6587.

REENTRY MAPPING BRIEF
"Mapping Community Data on Children of Prisoners: Strategies and Insights."

"As the nation's prison population continues to grow, particularly for women, documenting the impact of incarceration on children and families will be increasingly important." Such is the conclusion drawn by the Reentry Mapping Network (RMN) comprised of community-based organizations partnered with the Urban Institutes in their brief, "Mapping Community Data on Children of Prisoners: Strategies and Insights." As pointed out in the report and backed by other research, there are approximately 1.7 million children nationwide who have a parent currently incarcerated in State or Federal prison. That number reaches a staggering estimation of 7.5 million children when we include parents incarcerated in local jails, on probation or on parole. It is becoming increasingly obvious that stakeholders across the spectrum of criminal justice and children's services must come together to address the broad ramifications of this growing population. While this mapping effort and analysis is an important step forward, it also raises more questions. As the report states: "An organization must have the vision of how it will use the data and should design a study that best suits those purposes." What is clear from this research is that there are significant challenges ahead in sensitively and accurately collecting and analyzing data, but also that "better documentation of these children and their needs" is critical. As stated in the report: "Such information is an essential first step in ensuring that [children's] needs are met. Any type of local analysis of children of incarcerated parents, no matter how rudimentary, helps to make these children visible to policy makers, service providers, and the public."

For the full Reentry Mapping Brief visit:
<http://www.reentrymapping.org>

Practice Tip:
 As the Holidays approach, be mindful that this can be a difficult time when someone is missing from the Thanksgiving table or the Holiday festivities. Use this time to acknowledge this and engage young people in a conversation about what would help them. Let them tell you what they need and how much they do or don't want to talk about this.



SPOTLIGHT!
PROGRAMS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
"PEANUT BUTTER & JELLY SERVICES"

Speaking with Angie Vachio, co-founder of Peanut Butter and Jelly Family Services, Inc., it is evident that this is someone with boundless energy. Her journey to found the organization that has been providing services to incarcerated parents and their children for the past twenty-six years began as a public school teacher in her hometown of New York City. When she relocated to New Mexico, Peanut Butter & Jelly Services (PB & J) was born. Here she launched the **ImPact (The Importance of Family and Children Together)** program that now operates in three New Mexico correctional facilities, and aims "to reunify children with their incarcerated parents." The program begins in prison but does not end there, extending in to the community during and after the parent's release. There is also the KidPACT program. KidPACT coordinates support groups in public schools for school-age youth who either have a parent or other immediate family member who has experienced the criminal justice system. Though Ms. Vachio is retired from PB & J, it's hard to tell: she still dedicates much of her time to creating a "statewide system of safety for children whose parents are involved with the criminal justice system." She also believes in making sure young people are a part of informing this process and believes in the power of their sharing their experiences with policymakers and others, including other children. Ideally, she says, school and peer support groups are facilitated by older children of incarcerated parents.

For more information on Peanut Butter & Jelly go to: <http://www.pbjfamilyservices.org>

Youth Speak Out on Family Life Behind Bars at: www.familylifebehindbars.org

Founded by CUNY Journalism Professor Sandeep Junnagar, **Family Life Behind Bars** provides unique support to and insight from those directly affected by the incarceration of a family member. Particularly unique and valuable are the video and audio columns where young people tell their stories and speak about issues of importance to them. Sixteen year old Davian Reynolds speaks about "At School and Wondering what others Kids Are Thinking about You," Makeba Lavan speaks about her decision to go to college and the role her mother's incarceration played in this; and Emari Davis offers a monthly audio column about various aspects of having an incarcerated parent. Professor Junnagar is committed to expanding information available through the media and ensuring that youth voices are a critical part of this expansion.

My Own
 By Trisha

Walking the halls
 My hands run the walls
 I think about how far
 I have come
 From second to third
 grade my mother
 began to stray
 Somehow I just lost
 faith
 When I saw my
 mother in hand cuffs
 My life became so
 rough
 From then 'till now I
 can't seem to
 believe
 How much I've come
 to overcome and
 achieve
 Without a coach
 Without a friend
 Without that person
 to help comprehend
 Why things seem so
 rough
 And why I can't have
 my own
 My own choice
 My own voice
 My own hope
 My own Mom
 Now she's here and I
 don't want her here
 I want the Mom I
 used to have
 The Mom who used
 to hold my hand
 But I've come to
 learn that I've
 created my own
 No one can rob me
 of my thoughts
 No one can take
 away my hopes
 No one can take
 away my beliefs
 No one can rethink
 my dreams
 I am my own

Reprinted:
 Trisha is a former Youth Ambassador at The Osborne Association. Her poem was published in an online newsletter to Guidance Counselors (2007).