

Tough Topic, Necessary Reading

Finding Books for Children with Incarcerated Parents

REBECCA J. SHLAFER AND ALYSSA SCRIGNOLI

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world,¹ and it is estimated that about 53 percent of men and 61 percent of women in the US prison population are parents of minor children.²

As the number of people incarcerated in US prisons and jails grows, so too does the number of children affected by their parents' absence. Recent estimates suggest that more than 2.7 million US children now have a parent in prison or jail.³

Children with incarcerated parents are at increased risk for adverse outcomes across multiple domains of development, including behavioral and emotional problems (for example, depression, anxiety, acting out), cognitive delays, and difficulties in school.⁴ Although honest, age-appropriate communication about the parent's incarceration has been shown to help promote resilience among children with incarcerated parents, children's caregivers and other professionals who work with this population (teachers, social workers) may struggle with initiating such conversations or knowing how to respond to children's difficult questions.⁵ Further, few developmentally appropriate resources exist to help support children with incarcerated parents.

Children's literature may be one potential resource for supporting children and youth with incarcerated parents. Although children's books have addressed many other sensitive issues, including adoption, disabilities, divorce, and the death of a parent, relatively few books have been written addressing parental incarceration. Like books on other sensitive topics, though, children's books that address the issue of incarceration could serve many purposes and could benefit children with a parent in prison or jail.

First, books on parental incarceration could provide one avenue for caregivers and professionals to initiate conversations with children about where the parent is or why they cannot be with the child. The book's plot or the characters' experiences could encourage children to ask questions, including questions about their own experiences and feelings (being scared when the police came and took dad, feeling sad that mom is missing a birthday). The books might also give readers language with which to talk about sensitive issues (arrest, foster care, social worker). Further, children may relate to the books' characters and feel less ashamed and stigmatized, knowing that they are not alone.

Although there are potential benefits to children's books that address the topic of parental incarceration, there are also potential challenges. Although the reading level may be appropriate for the child's age, the book may introduce topics that are not developmentally appropriate (such as gangs or substance use). Further, a book may evoke memories of traumatic experiences that—without support from caregivers or other professionals—could heighten children's arousal and have adverse effects.



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To avoid such unintended consequences, it's important for caregivers and professionals to have information about each book when making recommendations for children and youth with incarcerated parents. Information about the age group of readers the book is appropriate for, key issues addressed in the book that may be sensitive topics, and a summary of the book would help inform book selections for children with incarcerated parents. With this goal in mind, we sought out to review children's books on this topic.

Book Selection

We identified existing book lists that had been created by other organizations and agencies that focused specifically on children with incarcerated parents (such as the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, <https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/resources/books-films/#ChildrenBooks>). From these lists, we identified books that were still in print and available for purchase. We used Amazon to locate each book.

Many of the books on the existing lists were no longer available for purchase or were unaffordable (exceptionally high prices on out-of-print titles). Via Amazon, we were directed to numerous titles that were related to our topic of interest through various recommendation engines. This allowed us to identify additional books that did not appear on previous lists. The final book list included twenty books.

Book Reviews

Fourteen undergraduate and graduate students representing multiple disciplines (such as child psychology, family social sciences, sociology, public health, and women's studies) reviewed the books. All of the students had expertise in parental incarceration and were working as interns on research projects related to this topic, under my supervision. With the exception of a few chapter books, each book was independently read and reviewed by two students.

Students were asked to identify a target age group, relevant keywords (foster care, abuse, drug use, prison) that might guide caregivers and practitioners, and prepare a brief summary of the book. They also provided a rating (out of five stars). The two reviews for each book were then compiled into one review; the recommended ages and ratings were averaged across reviewers.

Results

The title, author(s), recommended ages, keywords, a brief summary and rating for each of the twenty books are presented in table 1. Most of the books targeted school-age and pre-teen



readers. Some of the books were most appropriate for pre-readers and young children (*My Daddy Is in Jail* by Janet M. Bender); others were most appropriate for adolescents or young-adult readers (*My Father's Son* by Terri Fields).

The books addressed a wide range of issues related to parental incarceration, including witnessing a parent's arrest, visits between children and their incarcerated parents, foster care, and stigma. The books were well received by the reviewers and most were reviewed quite positively; fourteen of the twenty books received a rating of four or five stars.

Although our list is intended to help guide book recommendations for children with incarcerated parents, it should not be considered a substitute for caregivers' and professionals' judgment about what would be most appropriate for the children in their care. We recommend that whenever possible, caregivers and professionals pre-read the books so they have time to organize their own thoughts about the story and its characters and have time to reflect on how the child may interpret the book. Further, these books are not intended to replace professional counseling, but instead provide one source of support that may help children cope during a difficult time.

While there are likely more books that address this topic, we restricted our review to books that were still in print and readily available via online retailers. We also recognize that there are many books addressing topics that are related to parental incarceration (mental illness, addiction, foster care) that may also be relevant to this population. Although we chose not to include those books here and instead focus specifically on the topic of parental incarceration, such books would likely be beneficial to children of incarcerated parents and the caregivers and professionals working with them.

Further, although there are considerably more resources that exist on this topic (booklets, brochures, reports, journal articles), nearly all of these resources are for adult audiences and thus we have chosen not to review those resources here.

Books offer a unique and valuable way to reach children struggling with difficult life experiences, including the incarceration of a parent. But beyond books, libraries can offer a safe and welcoming space—with connections to additional community-based resources—for children and families impacted by incarceration. For these reasons, we recommend that school and public libraries add books on parental incarceration to their collections. 📖

References

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Table 1. Research to Practice Series: Children’s Book Review—Parental Incarceration
Rebecca J. Schlafer, Ph.D. & Alyssa Scrignoli

These books were reviewed and rated (1-5 stars) for content related to parental incarceration, availability, and affordability by a group of fourteen students representing multiple disciplines (e.g., child psychology, family social sciences, sociology, public health women’s studies) under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Schlafer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota (shlaf002@umn.edu). The review process was informed by an examination of book lists created by other organizations and agencies and the use of an online retailer. With the exception of a few chapter books, each book was independently read and reviewed by two reviewers combined into one review; recommended ages and ratings were averaged across reviewers.

Book title, Author	Ages	Keywords	Summary
<i>After Tupac and D Foster</i> , Jacqueline Woodson	10+	Foster care, prison, friendship, coming of age, Tupac	The unnamed narrator is an African American teenage girl who grows up with her two best friends. She struggles to make sense of the depictions of African American people in the media, as well as growing up in a world filled with violence, prison, music, friendship, family, and loss. As she tries to understand her friend’s experience in the foster care system, she learns more about herself. ★★★★★
<i>Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart</i> , Vera B. Williams	7+	Jail, cops, arrests, sisters, father	Using pictures and poems, the book tells a story of two sisters who stick together through tough times while their father is in jail. The father was sent to jail for forging a check after he was fired from his job. The sisters take care of each other while their mom works hard to support her children. ★★★★★
<i>An Inmate’s Daughter</i> , Jan Walker	11+	Stigma, family, prison	Jenna MacDonald’s father was sent to prison. Jenna’s mom tried to cover up this fact because she didn’t want it to reflect poorly on the family. When Jenna finds that she can’t talk about the experience of having an incarcerated father with her friends, she finds support through journaling and reflecting on her feelings about her father. ★★★★★
<i>Do Not Pass Go</i> , Kirkpatrick Hill	9+	Jail, stigma, family	This story is told from the perspective of Deet, a young, but very mature and reflective, boy who is the oldest of his two siblings. His dad goes to jail for using drugs to stay awake on the job. Throughout the book, as Deet begins to visit his father each week, his perspective drastically changes. He goes from being ashamed and embarrassed about his dad, to seeing the people who go to jail in a new light. He realizes that other kids at school have the same experience as he and that the inmates are just people, just like his father. ★★★★★
<i>Five-Finger Discount</i> , Barthe DeClements	8-13	Theft, father, incarceration	Jerry Johnson is in fifth grade. His father is in jail and he doesn’t want anyone to know. One of his fellow classmates figures it out and threatens to tell everyone, which creates conflict between the two of them. Jerry steals pieces of wood from a construction site to build a tree house and also steals shoes to give to his mother because he can’t afford to buy them. When his father is released on parole, they go shopping and his dad attempts to steal shoes by using Jerry. This is when Jerry finally learns that this is not okay no matter what the circumstances. ★★★★★
<i>Harry Sue</i> , Sue Stauffacher	8-12	Incarcerated mother, felons, Wizard of Oz	This story is told through the eyes of eleven-year-old Harriet Susan Clotkin, also known as Harry Sue. Both of Harry’s parents are incarcerated, so she lives with her grandmother who is abusive. Harry wants to be incarcerated with her mother as soon as she is able, and begins using prison slang. Even though she seems to be tough, Harry Sue is still a caring eleven-year-old. She tries to protect the children that are being mistreated by her grandmother. Harry Sue’s life is much like Dorothy’s in <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> ; she is trying to find her way home, but in the end she realizes she was there all along. ★★★★★

Book title, Author	Ages	Keywords	Summary
<i>Jailbird Kid</i> , Shirlee Smith Matheson	8-12	Prison, bank robbery	This story is told by Angela, a ninth grade girl whose dad has just returned home from prison to live with Angela and her mom. <i>Jailbird Kid</i> nicely illustrates the many struggles Angela deals with, particularly regarding the conflicted feelings she has about her father and her family. She deeply loves her father and tries to help him find work, but also knows he is making unhealthy decisions. She grapples with who to talk to and when, and her feelings of embarrassment about how her friends and others in the town see her and her family. While her father gets mildly caught up in old habits, the story ultimately ends on an upbeat note. ★★★★★
<i>Jakeman</i> , Deborah Ellis	8-12	Mother incarcerated, foster home, social workers	This story is about Jake who visits Wickham prison with his older sister, Shoshana. Jake has been writing to the governor for three years to have his mother pardoned, but he has never received a response. Together, Jake and his sister must sneak out of their foster home to meet the bus for the 10-hour ride. Jake visits regularly and describes the multiple rules about visiting to his friend who is a "first timer." One trip home from the prison is filled with adventure and chaos as Jake continues his quest to get his mother pardoned. ★★☆☆☆
<i>Mexican Whiteboy</i> , Matt de la Peña	13+	Racial identity, absent father, cultural barriers	Danny is half-Mexican and visiting his father's family this summer near the Mexico border. At his home in San Diego, he attends an all-white private school where his skin is too dark to fit in. Here in National City, where the population is predominantly Mexican, he stands out as "too white". He struggles to find his place as a "Mexican Whiteboy" and save up to find his absent father in Mexico. Another character, Uno, also stands out because of race; he is the only black kid in town. He dreams of getting out of National City, hoping to move to Oxnard to be with his father. Together, Danny and Uno use Danny's baseball talent to con local teams, as long as Danny can maintain control of his pitches. At the end of the story, Danny learns that his dad did not run off to Mexico, but instead has been in prison for the past several years. ★★★★★
<i>My Daddy is in Jail</i> , Janet Bender	3-10	Jail, witnessing arrest	A young girl returns home from school to witness her father being arrested. The book discusses the girl's confusion and her other complex feelings about her father's arrest. Ultimately, the young girl finds help from the guidance counselor at school. ★★★★★
<i>My Father's Son</i> , Terri Fields	16+	Homicide, paternal incarceration, coming of age	Kevin is shocked to discover his father plastered in the media as a serial killer, responsible for the brutal deaths of over a dozen women. Kevin's parents had been separated for years and had split his time between both parents. Kevin questions his father's innocence, never thinking his father could be responsible for such atrocities. Kevin and his mother struggle to survive financially and socially. The events that unfold are heart-wrenching, and will keep readers at the edge of their seat. ★★★★★
<i>My Mom Went to Jail</i> , Kathleen Hodgkins and Suzanne Bergen	3+	Foster care, jail, feelings coping	Sarah is a young girl who lives with foster parents because her mother is incarcerated. In this short book, readers learn a bit about some of the difficulties Sarah is facing, including some of her thoughts and feelings about her mom being in jail. ★★☆☆☆
<i>The Night Dad Went to Jail</i> , Melissa Higgins	5-10	Witnessing arrest, jail, prison, social worker	Sketch witnesses his dad's arrest, and is confused and angry about why his dad was taken away. After his dad's arrest, Sketch has a hard time in school and acts out aggressively towards another kid at school. This book follows Sketch's story through his dad's incarceration, including how Sketch ultimately finds support at school and from a mentor, and Sketch's experiences with visiting his dad in prison. ★★★★★
<i>The Not-Just Anybody Family</i> , Betsy Cromer Byars	8-12	Arrest, jail, grandfather, siblings, dogs, broken legs, police, lawyer, courtroom, judge	Junior Blossom wakes up in the hospital after falling off the roof and breaking both of his legs. He remembers being on the roof with his siblings when they spotted a police car headed toward their family farm. When the police arrived, his siblings (Maggie and Vern) ran, leaving Junior behind. They later learned that their grandfather is in jail. With their mom gone performing in the rodeo, Maggie and Vern are left to rescue Junior and their grandfather, and solve their family's problems. ★★★★★
<i>Sunny Holiday</i> , Coleen Paratore	3-9	Jail, father, spirituality	Sunny is a spunky nine-year-old with a wonderful support system that includes her mother, best friend, family friends, and neighbors. Sunny's father is in jail. Still, her father, mother, and friends instill remarkable hope in Sunny. The story follows Sunny and her adventures with her friend, living with her father in jail, and becoming involved in improving the community by infiltrating politics. ★★★★★
<i>Tyrell</i> , Coe Booth	15+	Homelessness, incarceration, prison, coming of age	Tyrell is a 15-year-old boy. His father is currently doing his third stint in prison. While his dad is in prison, Tyrell has primary responsibility for keeping the rest of his family safe. They have recently lost their home and moved to emergency housing. At the shelter, Tyrell meets a girl named Jasmine who has lost both of her parents and is being raised by her sister. Tyrell has an ambivalent relationship with his father - he idolizes him, but he is also angry at his father for ending up in prison again. Meanwhile, Tyrell is dating a "good girl" whose mother is everything that his own parents are not. The central theme of this book is around Black masculinity and what it means to be a man in his community. ★★★★★

Book title, Author	Ages	Keywords	Summary
<i>Visiting Day</i> , Jacqueline Woodson and James Ransome	4-9	Paternal incarceration, contact visits, jail, father, grandmother	This well illustrated book tells the story of a little girl as she prepares to visit her father. Once a month, she takes a long bus ride with her grandmother to visit her father in prison. Although she is very excited to visit, she is sad that it is over so quickly. Her grandmother reminds her to count her blessings and start a new list of things to tell her dad at the next visit. ★★★★★
<i>What Will Happen to Me</i> , Howard Zehr and Lorraine S. Amstutz	4+	Parental incarceration, caregivers, personal accounts, resource	The first section of this book includes personal stories of children with incarcerated parents. Each story illustrates different experiences children may encounter when a parent is incarcerated. Some children remember their parent being taken away. Some have good relationships with their incarcerated parent, while others acknowledge feelings of anger or grief. The second section of this book is for caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated. There are a few personal stories, in addition to specific advice for caregivers. ★★★★★
<i>Wish You Were Here</i> , Autumn Spanne, Nora McCarthy and Laura Longhine	12+	Parental incarceration, prison, visitations	The book is divided into two sections: teens and parents. The book is filled with personal narratives that both teens and parents share about their experience related to incarceration. The different stories the teens share cover myriad topics, including anger, forgiveness, relationship building, and feelings about visiting their incarcerated parent. The parents share first-hand accounts of the pain, grief, guilt, shame, and regret that incarceration has produced. One particular parent speaks of his experience being sexually molested as a child, and becoming a sexual molester once he had children. ★★★☆☆
<i>The Year the Swallows Came Early</i> , Kathryn Fitzmaurice	8-15	Witnessing arrest, police, jail, gambling	Eleanor Robinson, known as "Groovy," is an 11-year-old girl who dreams of someday going to cooking school. Her dreams quickly fall apart when her mom has her dad arrested and Groovy learns that her father gambled away her inheritance money. She goes through a roller coaster of emotions from anger towards her mother, and then towards her father, to sadness while her dad is away. Throughout her journey, she witnesses her friend's family problems, as well. But, the swallows that return to the city every year teach her some life lessons and restore her hope. Ultimately, Eleanor learns to forgive her dad and to "expect the unexpected." ★★★★★

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