

## **Children and Maternal Incarceration: The Significance of Facilitating Healthy Mother-Child Attachment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Maternal incarceration is a growing problem that significantly impacts mother-child relationships. Using attachment theory to support the concept that healthy mother-child relationships are critical, this review examines a portion of the research related to incarcerated mothers and their children and the impact prison-based parenting programs have on mother-child relationships during incarceration. Components that are most influential in promoting and maintaining healthy mother-child relationships and the areas that require further improvement are identified and discussed. Implications of these findings on the further implementation of mother-child programming is also briefly summarized and discussed.*

### **Introduction**

In a review of incarcerated mothers and child visitation Laughlin, Arrigo, Blevins and Coston (2008) state that, "For many Americans, there is something distinct about the bond between a mother and her offspring...an intangible dimension exists in the act of mothering that cannot be similarly experienced through fatherhood" (p. 223). Indeed, mother-child relationships are unique, and the quality of these relationships can have lasting effects on the children. Disruption of this attachment relationship early in life potentially has serious consequences (Siegel, 1999). Currently, there is a growing group of children who are subjected to forced separation from their mothers through incarceration.

The following is meant as a brief introduction to the state of maternal incarceration, which will be expanded upon in a later section. Maternal incarceration is on the rise and has increased 122% from 1991 to 2007 (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009). Currently, about two-thirds of incarcerated women are mothers. Furthermore, approximately two-thirds of mothers are the primary caregiver of their children at the time of arrest (Laughlin, et al., 2008).

These numbers are alarming because they indicate that the number of minor children who are vulnerable to the multitude of problems associated with incarceration could be increasing. Considering the research done on early attachment relationships, these children are at a high risk for developing insecure attachment with their mothers (Poehlmann, 2005; Siegel, 1999). As will be expanded upon in a later section, the representations of attachment that a child develops early in life, relational patterns between parent and child, and the presence of long-term parent-child bonding can have significant influence on interpersonal relations, emotional maturity, and academic success later in life (Siegel). These children are at further risk due to the typical risk factors that are associated with low socioeconomic status and parental incarceration (Bloom & Brown, 2009).

From a purely logical perspective, biological parents should be their child's primary caregiver due to the limited availability of alternate care. In addition to this, the majority of incarcerated mothers desire to resume primary care after their release. Also, a large number of these mothers are expected to, and eventually do, regain this role (Bloom & Brown, 2009). Therefore, it is prudent to promote and facilitate healthy mother-child attachment during maternal incarceration to improve mother-child relationships pre- and post- release and to improve overall outcomes for affected children.

This review examines a portion of the research related to incarcerated mothers and their children and how attachment theory supports that improving, promoting, and facilitating healthy mother-child relationships and stable living arrangements during incarceration is particularly beneficial for these families. Using the literature and research related to attachment theory, maternal incarceration, and prison-based parenting programs, the following will be discussed:

- The development of secure and insecure attachment relationships
- Attachment relationships in relation to maternal incarceration
- The impact of maternal incarceration on the child
- The affects of maternal incarceration on the mother-child relationship
- The status of maternal incarceration
- The barriers associated with maternal incarceration that impede the development of secure attachment and healthy relationships
- The components of prison-based parenting programs that are influential in promoting and maintaining healthy mother-child relationships and the areas that require further improvement
- Implications of these findings on the further implementation of mother-child programming

### **Role of Parent-Child Attachment**

#### *The Development of Attachment Relationships*

Research on attachment in infants and young children asserts that humans have an in-born attachment system in the brain that exists to ensure survival during the most vulnerable stage of life. This in-born system causes an infant to seek the proximity of his or her caregivers to initiate communication (Siegel, 1999). In this way, attachment is formed between parent and child. However, attachment is a dynamic process, and specific attachment relationships and the quality of the attachment directly affects the neurological function and behavior of the infant (Siegel). In his book, *The Developing Mind*, Siegel expounds the significance of attachment relationships:

These salient emotional relationships have a direct affect on the development of the domains of mental functioning that serve as our conceptual anchor points: memory, narrative, emotion, representations, and states of mind. In this way, attachment relationships may serve to create the central foundation from which the mind develops (p. 68).

Although nearly every child will develop attachment with his or her primary caregiver, not every attachment is ideal.

Through the development of the Infant Strange Situation, Ainsworth and Bowlby categorized attachment relationships by assessing an infant's internal working models of attachment. This was done by observing the infant's reactions and behaviors during separation and reunion with caregivers (1978, as cited in Siegel, 1999). While secure attachment during the Infant Strange Situation is characterized by a willingness to explore, a desire to reunite with parent, an initiation of contact upon reunion, and a return to play after initial reunion, insecure attachment takes several forms. These behaviors include a lack of concern during separation or reunion, exaggerated concern and behavior, and disorganized behavior. The classifications are avoidant attachment, resistant/ambivalent attachment, and disorganized/disoriented attachment, respectively. The form of insecure attachment depends on a parent's availability and ability to attune to their child's needs as well as the parent's attitude and state of mind concerning attachment (Siegel).

As an infant forms attachment with the caregiver, the infant uses the relationship to create a mental schema for security—a secure base. According to attachment theory, if a child feels a secure base, where his or her safety and emotional needs are met, the child will feel comfortable exploring his or her environment and developing relationships, which allows for healthy development (Siegel, 1999). Bowlby documented the negative effects of disrupted attachment and lack of secure attachment for young children through animal studies. Bowlby discovered that the internal working model of attachment that is developed determines the child's perceptions and reactions to the world (1969, as cited in Siegel). Lack of a secure base interferes with a child's ability to engage in age-appropriate activities. This can delay or

prevent normal development and cause other life-long dysfunctions related to interpersonal interactions, which will be further discussed in later sections (Siegel).

### *The Effects of Insecure Attachment*

According to Siegel (1999), the specific behavioral reactions and adaptations that occur in response to attachment relationships are indicators that the attachment system and the child's brain function are shaped through these experiences of attachment. As a result, the change in brain function in relation to insecure attachments can lead to a variety of dysfunctions.

First, several studies have shown a link between insecure attachments and psychopathology. Van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg studies revealed an increase in mood disorder and anxiety associated with insecure attachments (1996, as cited in Siegel, 1999). In addition, children and adults who formed disorganized/disoriented attachment early in life could potentially experience dissociative symptoms, attention deficits, behavior impulsivity, and difficulty with emotional regulation. Children who formed avoidant attachments are at a greater risk for lacking social competence (Siegel). Early attachment relationships are also associated with emotional maturity, peer relationships, and academic performance during adolescence (Siegel).

## **The Negative Effect of Maternal Incarceration on Young Children**

### *The Impact of Incarceration on Children*

The negative effects of maternal incarceration are well documented for children of every age group. Research by Travis, Cincotta, and Solomon reveals that shortly after the incarceration of their mother many children experience shame, stigma, school problems, and delinquency. Travis et al. also reports that long-term effects include poor coping skills, negative perception of legal authority, and decreased trust of maternal authority (2003, as cited in Laughlin et al., 2008). Research by Bilchik et al. finds that children with incarcerated parents will more often experience withdrawal, anxiety, and depression (2001, as cited in Gonzalez, Romero, & Cerbana, 2007). In particular, young children are identified as being vulnerable to experiencing problems related to parental incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005). In a review of incarcerated parents and their children, research by Johnston reportedly reveals that for children under the age of two bonding abilities are affected, and for children aged two to six, anxiety, developmental regression, acute traumatic stress, and survivor guilt are more likely to occur (1995, as cited in Simmons, 2000).

Johnston also reports that children who are repeatedly separated from their parents because of parental incarceration are more likely to be delinquent and/or gang-involved during adolescence and are more likely to experience intergenerational incarceration in the future (1995, as cited in Simmons, 2000). Johnston links experiences associated with parental incarceration, such as physical abuse, separation, witnessing violence, and parental substance abuse to physical aggression, withdrawal and substance abuse, gang activity, and asocial behavior, respectively (1995, as cited in Simmons). Delinquency and gang involvement are also linked to another prevalent problem for children of incarcerated mothers—caregiver instability. In a research study on delinquency and gang involvement in children affected by parental incarceration, only 9% of the group had resided with the same caregiver since birth (as cited in Simmons).

Poehlmann's (2005) study on attachment relationships and maternal incarceration, which uses the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) to assess representations of attachment, reveals the importance of stability for young children—nearly every child that had a secure representation of attachment to their incarcerated mother also had a secure representation of attachment to their caregiver. Furthermore, children who resided with the same caregiver from the beginning of their mother's incarceration were far more likely to display secure representations of attachment with their mothers. The study also reports that young children who reacted with sadness rather than anger had more positive

representations of attachment, which suggests that adequate comfort and nurturing in a stable environment might contribute to healthier attachment to the incarcerated mother (Poehlmann).

### *Attachment Relationships and Maternal Incarceration*

When examining attachment relationships as they relate to maternal incarceration, there are several points to consider. First, in a secure attachment relationship separation from the primary caregiver can cause serious distress in the child (Siegel, 1999). Maternal incarceration often separates mothers and their children for months or years at a time, often with little to no physical contact (Covington, 2003). Even for secure attachments, this separation poses a risk to a child's later development and adjustment. A study by the Women's Prison Association (WPA) reports that, according to the American Psychological Society, infants who have the opportunity to securely attach to the mothers have more self-reliance and self-confidence in toddlerhood (WPA, 2009). Second, in the case of insecure attachments, separation limits the opportunities for developing a secure attachment. Siegel states that appropriate intervention for parents and young children can result in the transformation of insecure attachments into secure attachments. Third, a child's placement or living arrangements during their mother's incarceration has a significant impact on the type of relationship that is maintained and developed with their mothers during incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005). Some studies show that this placement is linked to adjustment after parental incarceration (Laughlin et al., 2008). Last, as previously discussed, insecure attachment and disrupted attachment can lead to emotional, social, and psychological dysfunction (Siegel). For these reasons, secure attachment and healthy mother-child relationships should be made a priority.

## **Status of Incarcerated Mothers and Their Children and the Barriers to Healthy Attachment**

### *An Overview of Statistics Related to Maternal Incarceration*

To expand upon the state of maternal incarceration introduced previously, nearly two-thirds of female inmates in the United States are mothers, and approximately two-thirds of these mothers had custody of their children prior to being incarcerated (Laughlin et al., 2008; Schirmer et al., 2009). The vast majority, about three-quarters, are serving time for non-violent crimes (Simmons, 2000). A 2009 report from The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform by Schirmer et al. states that 2.1% of minor children in the United States have at least one parent in state or federal incarceration. According to the report, 22% of children of state prisoners and 16% of children of federal prisoners are under the age of five (Schirmer et al.). According to Covington (2003), 1.3 million children are without a mother due to incarceration. Additionally, the 2009 report from the Women's Prison Association (WPA) states that 3-6% of mothers in jails and state and federal prison facilities are pregnant when they are admitted. Furthermore, during incarceration only about one-third of children reside with their fathers (Arditti & Few, 2006; Schirmer et al.). The majority of the remaining children live with grandparents or other relatives. A smaller portion, about 10%, is placed in foster care (Covington; Schirmer et al.).

Another alarming problem related to maternal incarceration is that the majority of children never visit their mother during their mother's incarceration. Mumola reports that, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 54% of incarcerated mothers in state facilities never have a visit with their children (2000, as cited in Covington, 2003). However, Holt and Miller report that prisoners in California with consistent visitation from family and friends are less likely to recidivate, a prevalent problem among women prisoners that exacerbates childhood trauma related to maternal incarceration (1972, as cited in Laughlin et al., 2008). A study of mothers participating in a prison nursery program in Nebraska reports that the recidivism rate dropped from 33% to 9% when women were allowed to keep their infant during incarceration (WPA, 2009). In addition, the New York State Department of Correctional Services reports that prisoners who have strong ties with family while imprisoned are much less likely to recidivate (1992, as cited in WPA). In addition to possibly contributing to the high rate of recidivism, this lack of visitation

may contribute to insecure attachment, because prolonged or reoccurring separation interferes with secure attachment (Siegel, 1999). The study of mother-child attachment relationships by Poehlmann (2005) reveals that 63% of the children studied had insecure representations of attachment with their incarcerated mothers. These insecure attachments, in addition to possibly stemming from socioeconomic risk factors, could be related to the repeated disruption of care (Poehlmann).

Considering the significant risk that exists for these mothers and their children, care must be taken not only to provide access to visitation but also to provide supportive services that aim to improve circumstances for these families. The fact that insecure relationships can develop into secure attachment (Siegel, 1999) is one motivation for providing these necessary services. Visitation is only one component. Services such as parenting classes and appropriate visitation facilities, which will be discussed in later sections, are also needed to maximize chances for success.

### *Barriers*

There are numerous barriers that prevent mother-child relationships from being maintained or improved during incarceration. The following three barriers carry a significant impact:

- Pre-existing socioeconomic factors
- Prison and program restrictions and distance from child's residence
- Lack of caregiver cooperation

First, the majority of incarcerated mothers come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Covington, 2003). In addition, a large number have experienced significant abuse in their lifetimes (Atwood, 2000). In a study on risk factors and maternal incarceration, Green, Haney, and Hurtado (2000) report that 86% of incarcerated women in the study had experienced physical abuse or sexual abuse during their childhoods. Furthermore, a study by Daley, Moss, and Campbell report that nearly a quarter of the general prison population has a history of psychiatric disorders (1995, as cited in Covington). Factors such as these put mother-child pairs at higher risk for insecure attachment because parent instability is linked to insecure attachment (Siegel, 1999). Poehlmann's (2005) study of attachment representations in young children affected by maternal incarceration shows a high rate of insecure representations of attachment (Poehlmann). Considering the risk factors present in many of these families, it is likely that these risk factors contribute to the high rate of insecure attachment. For example, Bloom and Brown (2009) report that the majority of mothers studied had significant risk factors, other than incarceration, that could negatively impact the mother-child relationship. These risk factors include a low level of education (55%), unstable living arrangements (65%), and prior incarceration for mainly non-violent and drug related crimes (51%). In addition, most had little work history. About one-quarter of the mothers had also been involved with child protective services, possibly due to previous incarceration and the risk factors associated with low socioeconomic status (Bloom & Brown).

Second, many incarcerated mothers face circumstances that limit or prevent contact with their children, such as prison restrictions and geographical location. Some prison parenting programs place restrictions on entering specific visitation programs. For example, a review by Bruns (2006) reports that the overnight and extended stay programs are limited to mothers with children under the age of eleven or twelve. Live-in nursery programs in the United States are most often limited to women who give birth while incarcerated. Some of the programs in the United States also require that the child leave the facility at a predetermined age. Usually this age is twelve to eighteen months, if the mother's sentence will not be completed by the time the child reaches the upper age limit (Bruns; WAP, 2009). To be eligible for other programs the mother's sentence must not exceed a specified number of years or the mother's sentence must be completed by the time the child is required to leave (WPA). Community-based facilities generally do not require that the mother gives birth during incarceration to be eligible, but the majority of these programs are limited to mothers with children under the age of three to six (WPA).

A study on the mental health of incarcerated mothers by Birmingham, Coulson, Gregoire, Kamal and Mullee (2006) reports that there are sometimes restrictions related to certain mental health diagnoses when applying for parenting programs. The 2009 WPA report states that nearly every prison nursery program and community-based residential program requires that the mother not be convicted of a crime considered to be violent and that the mother undergoes a screening prior to admission into the program. Individual programs have a variety of other requirements. For example, one program requires that the mothers must not have received any write-ups during her incarceration. Several other programs require that the mothers must not have a history of mental health diagnoses or involvement with child welfare (WPA). Considering the study by Daley et al. that finds almost a quarter of incarcerated individuals in the general population reported a history of some kind of psychiatric disorder (1995, as cited in Covington, 2003), this likely excludes a substantial number of women from participating in these programs.

While these restrictions have a rationale and technically do not prevent mothers from receiving visits outside of the parenting programs, they reduce the number, quality, and benefit of visitation for some women and children. Far more prisons lack appropriate facilities for child visitation than those that provide parenting programs and age-appropriate surroundings (Covington, 2003). Furthermore, these restrictions often exclude mothers who are logically in the greatest need of learning parenting skills.

In addition to prison and program restrictions, many mothers face the challenge of being housed long distances from their homes (Laughlin et al., 2008). Furthermore, many caregivers lack funds and transportation to set up regular visits for the children (Bruns, 2006). This leads to a third problem, which is the lack of cooperation and/or obligation of caregivers to arrange visits.

Even in the best of circumstances, when a mother is housed near her child and she has access to supportive parenting services, she might encounter a lack of cooperation from her child's caregiver (Laughlin et al., 2008). Some mothers experience conflict with these family members because of their incarceration, and some family members do not approve of bringing the child in for visitation (Bruns, 2006; Laughlin, et al.). Other caregivers keep the incarceration a secret from the child (Poehlmann, 2005). These problems might be further exacerbated because the mother often has no control over what choices her child's caregiver makes regarding visitation. Especially in the case of foster families, the caregiver is under no obligation to initiate or facilitate contact (Laughlin et al.). Allowing mothers to retain some of their parental authority while incarcerated could lead to increased visitation, which in turn could lead to more secure attachment.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) further complicates child visitation and custody for incarcerated mothers. The ASFA states that children in foster care for fifteen consecutive months can be placed for adoption (Covington, 2003; Laughlin et al., 2008). This poses the danger of losing custody for mothers who do not have a family member to take over parenting responsibilities. Because of the mandatory sentencing for drug offences introduced in the 1980's, there has been an 888% increase in female offenders serving time for drug related offenses. Due to the fact that the majority of female offenders are serving time for drug offences, the length of the mother's sentence often exceeds this fifteen month limit (Laughlin et al.). This puts a number of mothers with children in foster care in danger of losing all parental rights while imprisoned. While addressing family permanency for foster children is critical, it seems prudent to evaluate situations involving incarceration separately. Allowing parents the chance to retain custody under the condition that they demonstrate motivation and potential for successful outcomes with intervention is justified by the literature asserting the critical nature of parent-child attachment.

By looking at the barriers to forming healthy relationships that exist for incarcerated mothers and their children and the factors that significantly impact mother-child relationships during maternal incarceration, a more complete picture is formed, which can be used to better understand and better serve this vulnerable group.

## **Components of Prison-Based Parenting Programs that Promote or Impede Mother-Child Relationships and Secure Attachment**

### *Overview*

Numerous research studies have examined parenting from prison and the programs that exist to assist incarcerated mothers and their children. While there are a myriad of factors that affect the quality of the mother-child relationship in these circumstances, this discussion will primarily focus on three factors identified in the literature as having a significant impact a child's ability to form a healthy and lasting relationship with his or her mother, the child's development, and the mother's response. While not discussed in detail here, the literature also reports that release planning and follow-up services significantly impact outcomes once incarceration is complete. The following factors to be discussed are:

- Quality of visitation environment
- Type and quality of involvement from other caregivers
- Parent education

### *What is Available?*

Prison parenting programs and accommodations come in many forms. A report released in 1992 shows that twelve states have some type of boarding-in program, and several other states have daytime programming (Craig, 2009). While these types of programs are growing in popularity, there is still a great need for the expansion of existing programs and implementation of addition programs. Current statistics reveal that more than half of children do not have access to their mothers while in prison (Covington, 2003). Of the prisons that do have programs, a portion of women are excluded due to screening guidelines (WPA, 2009; Bruns, 2006).

The components vary from program to program. Available funding is pivotal in determining how extensive the program is (WPA, 2009). A nationwide survey reports that in addition to the twelve states with boarding-in programs, three states had abandoned plans to implement similar programming due to lack of funding (Craig, 2009). Prison nurseries were commonplace in the United States up until the 1960's. However, reasons such as an apparent lack of need, cost, and health concerns for the infants caused the closure of programs in every state except New York (Craig; WPA).

Research in the last decade illustrating the importance of early mother-child bonding and the increase in the women prison population have caused some states and individual prisons across the nation to implement child visitation programs and prison nursery programs. These programs are often modeled after the programs at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York, which houses the oldest prison nursery program in the United States. Currently, prisons in nine states have nursery programs, where mothers are allowed, for a limited amount of time, to parent their child born during their incarceration (WPA, 2009). Prisons in seven states have community based residential facilities that allow mothers to live with their children in a community setting while serving their sentences (WPA).

Common components of parenting programs and child visitation programs include parent education, support groups, children's centers, and extended visits or special programs for children of prisoners. In a review by Bruns (2006) of fourteen parenting programs across the country, the common components of these programs are specialized visitation areas and parent education programs. It is noted that participation in parenting programs can also result in fewer policy violations among inmates in addition to reducing recidivism and providing opportunities to develop healthy attachment (Bruns; Gonzalez et al., 2007; WPA, 2009). Considering that these programs reduce recidivism, improve family outcomes, and reduce policy violations, the implementation and expansion of prison visitation and parenting programs is recommended.

### *Visitation Environment*

Poehlmann (2005) and Bruns (2006) conclude that children need access to their mothers during incarceration because it fosters healthy attachment and relationship formation and eases adjustment. In fact, every prison nursery program in the United States states mother-child bonding as a significant aspect of their purpose (WPA, 2009). However, research also finds that the environment in which the mother and child reside in and interact in has a significant impact on the quality of the relationship and visit, the benefit that is gained from the contact, and the development or behavior of the child. Research shows that punitive atmospheres and an absence of child-friendly surroundings, a diverse range of activities, and play materials have an impact (Arditti & Few, 2006; Covington, 2003; Eloff & Moen, 2003; Poehlmann). This supports the notion that care must be given to the environment in which interaction occurs to maximize benefits and to avoid negative outcomes. Because there are a variety of visitation circumstances, each factor will be considered in the context of the particular circumstance.

When visitation facilities were judged as inappropriate for small children, for example, having uniformed security officers, barbed wire, and a lack of play materials and privacy, the children that visited their mothers had slightly less positive attachment representations than the children that had not visited their mothers (Poehlmann, 2005). The environment was cited as a possible partial reason for the lower rate of positive representations for this group. In contrast, mothers participating in the Mother-Child Visitation Program (MCVP) in another prison, which provides monthly visits in a child-friendly classroom, self-report improved relationships and bonding with their children (Bruns, 2006). The inconsistencies in the outcomes of visitation experiences could suggest that the environment, to some degree, impacts the quality of mother-child interaction.

Other research on prison nurseries have shown that residing in the nursery sometimes negatively impacts development. Most often, a lack of appropriate materials and a limited variety of stimuli are stated as the reason for the delays. A study by Catan reports that the majority of the infants in the program suffered short-term developmental delays, which fortunately disappeared after leaving the program. The lack of stimuli and appropriate play materials are the stated reasons for this delay (1992, as cited in WPA, 2009). In a similar study by Busch-Rossenagel, 33% of the infants in the program scored below the mean on the Bayley's developmental scale. Like the Catan study, a lack of appropriate materials and stimuli were cited as reasons for the delays (1990, as cited in WPA).

Eloff and Moen (2003) conducted a study evaluating four mother-child pairs residing in an in-house mother-child prison unit in South Africa. The unit is described as very restrictive, lacking privacy and natural light. Outdoor time is limited to once a day. Mothers have no autonomy and must accept the enforced policies and schedules, which includes allowing unit staff complete control of childcare providers and discipline in a mother's absence (Eloff & Moen). Both the mothers and their children were affected by the restrictive environment and lack of age-appropriate materials. Children displayed an inability to recognize common objects; however, they did exhibit appropriate exploration and curiosity. Of the four mother-child pairs observed, the mothers demonstrated a variety of interaction with their children, but none of them encouraged imaginative play outside the materials provided for the study. Mothers also cited the restrictive nature of the facility as a reason for discontentment (Eloff & Moen). Although too small of a study to be generalized, it illustrates the importance of an environment conducive to optimal child rearing, especially in live-in facilities. Because other studies have shown strong mother-child attachment in the majority of mother-infant pairs studied, such as Catan's study on mother-infant pairs in an American prison nursery (1992, as cited in WPA, 2009), it is possible that variables such as the environment impact the quality of interaction in addition to affecting child development. In a study done in a Spanish mother-child prison unit and a community based facility, Jimenez and Palacios (2003) find that the children housed in the units do not show significant development delay as compared with the



general population; however, Jimenez and Palacios also report that community programs are preferable for optimizing development due to the less restrictive environment of a community based facility.

By neglecting the environmental aspect of mother-child interaction the benefits of this contact are compromised and negative outcomes are often the result. In view of the critical and time sensitive nature of mother-child bonding and the benefits that are acquired when mother-child prison units contain child appropriate surroundings, the negative impact of sub-optimal environments is not a justifiable reason for opposition of these types of units. Instead, careful guidelines could be set to ensure that mothers and their children are receiving the full benefit of the arrangement and that they are not suffering the consequences of poor structure, management, or funding.

### *Caregiver Involvement*

The nature of incarceration necessarily adds the element of outside caregivers. Child placement has a significant impact on the type of relationship and attachment a child has with their mother during incarceration, how well the child adjusts to the separation, and whether problems develop. Child placement can determine how much contact mothers have with their children, whether mothers retain custody, the degree of problems the child develops, and the type of attachment relationship experienced by the child. Stable, consistent placement is associated with better adjustment, more typical reactions and development, more secure attachment relationships with both mother and caregiver, and overall more positive outcomes for the families.

First, placement can determine if and when a mother has contact with her children. Two issues that are consistently reported in the literature include caregiver reluctance and distance. For example, a study by Arditti and Few (2006) states that about a quarter of mothers in the study report poor or very poor relationships with their children's custodial father, and another half of the mothers report only fair to good relationships. Bruns's (2006) review of prison visitation programs reports caregiver reluctance to allowing the children to visit the prison as one of the most frequently cited reasons for an absence of visits. The other major reason is limited transportation (Bruns). Laughlin et al. (2008) also reports a lack of cooperation from caregivers and distance as reasons for infrequent visits. In fact, in one study, about two-thirds of mothers were one hundred or more miles from their child's residence (Laughlin, et al.). These reasons and the limited resources of many families affected by incarceration partially account for the high rate of children who do not see their mother during incarceration. Bruns reports that while some programs address the transportation and distance barriers, there are virtually none that address the problem of caregiver reluctance.

Educating caregivers about pertinent issues related to mother-child separation during incarceration could have a positive impact on mother-child attachment. Poehlmann's (2005) study of attachment relationships and maternal incarceration reports that within the group of caregivers that withhold or distort information about the incarceration, children are more likely to have dysfunctional representations of attachment. However, children with caregivers that present the information honestly or simply are more likely to have positive representation of attachment (Poehlmann). This suggests that a positive and honest approach to the incarceration is beneficial to maintaining and developing healthier attachment during incarceration.

Losing custody is another concern, especially for the 10% of mothers that have children in foster care. As mentioned, the ASFA plays a pivotal role in this loss of custody (Bloom & Brown, 2009; Laughlin, et al., 2008). The ASFA is meant to facilitate family permanency for children in the foster care system; however, for incarcerated mothers, the ASFA can result in an involuntary termination of rights (Bloom & Brown; Laughlin et al.). Loss of custody can affect how well women function within the criminal justice system, which in turn can influence their eventual outcomes. Covington (2003) reports that problems such as aggression, manipulation, negativity, and rule infractions often stem from the grief and loss associated with women losing their role as mothers. "The only source of hope and motivation for many women during their involvement with the criminal justice system and their transition back to the

community is a connection with their children” (Covington, p. 77). Clearly, the success of many mothers is deeply connected to her involvement with her children.

A second problem in the child placement process is instability in placement and other quality related aspects of placement. Some research reports that inconsistency in placement is linked to a more difficult adjustment and a higher degree of problems associated with separation due to incarceration. Ease of adjustment may be linked to the honest and age-appropriate communication associated with secure representations of attachments to caregivers (Poehlmann, 2005). One study shows that the majority of children with secure representations of attachment with their caregivers also have secure representations of attachment with their mothers (Poehlmann). One way of interpreting this finding is to suggest that a stable, healthy relationship of a child with his or her caregiver contributes to a secure maternal attachment. Strength of Poehlmann’s study, for our purposes, is that it is based on attachment theory. “Consistent with the tenets of attachment theory, this study suggest that certain family experiences, such as developing relationships with consistent caregivers, may help children develop positive attachment relationship despite experiences of adversity” (Poehlmann, p. 692). Johnston’s research provides additional support for the notion that inconsistent care has a negative impact on children. For example, less than 10% of the adolescences in the Johnston study, all of which were affected by multiple parental incarcerations and most of which were involved in gangs or delinquency, received consistent care since birth (as cited in Simmons, 2000). This also suggests that separation from parents and lack of a stable placement might play a role in later dysfunction. While some of these problems may arise solely from the separation, Poehlmann’s study suggests that stable care can improve how the child experiences the separation.

### *Parent Education*

Like visitation centers, parent education programs have gained popularity and are often offered in conjunction with structured visitation programs. In fact, every prison nursery program in the United States offers an educational component (WPA, 2009). A review of fourteen day and live-in programs by Bruns reports that all of these programs offer an educational component, which is sometimes mandatory for participation in the program (Bruns, 2006). Research consistently reports the success of parenting education programs, which usually include a supportive atmosphere as well as instructional material on child development, child health, parenting adolescences, and basic care skills. A study by Gabel and Girard on the prison nursery programs at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility reports that the parent education classes in conjunction with the live-in nursery programs resulted in improved mother-infant bonding increased self-esteem, and the development of better parenting skills (1995, as cited in Bruns). Research by Carlson on the Mother Offspring Life Development (MOLD) program at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women reveals that for women participating in the parenting classes in conjunction with the prison nursery misconduct infractions dropped from 40% to 13%. The data also shows a reduction in recidivism from 33% to 9% (2001, as cited in Bruns). While the percentage of mothers in the general population who retained custody was not available, approximately 60% of mothers in the program resumed custody post release (as cited in Bruns). Research done by Thompson and Harm on the Parenting from Prison program offered through the Arkansas Department of Corrections, which consists of fifteen weeks of parenting classes and child visitation, reveals that the program resulted in a remarkable increase in self-esteem in mothers that have regular visits with their children and a significant improvement in parenting attitudes (2000, as cited in Bruns). Several other programs, including the HOPE program at Rockville Correctional Facility in Indiana and the Mothers Inside Loving Kids (MILK) program at the Virginia Correction Center for Women, yield similar results (Bruns).

The Partners in Parenting (PIP) program offered at several women’s corrections facilities in Colorado further supports the promise of parent education in correctional facilities (Gonzalez, et al., 2007). Pre- and post- surveys were administered to approximately two hundred mothers participating in the program. The surveys evaluated items such as parental control, understanding, knowledge, and

confidence. The survey also evaluated the value that the mothers placed on their parental duties and abilities to meet their child's needs. Eighty-five percent of participants intended to resume parenting post-release. Results showed a remarkable increase in confidence, basic knowledge of parenting, and value of parental duties (Gonzalez, et al.).

Unfortunately, not every child visitation program incorporates parental education into the program. For example, the innovation program, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB), initiated by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and offered in prisons in Florida, Arizona, Ohio, and Maryland, does not offer an educational component in every program. Limited funding is cited as the reason for no formal parenting classes in the Maryland program (Moses, 1995). With adequate funding, community involvement programs, such as GSBB, have the potential to include comprehensive release planning in addition to parenting education. Release planning is a component of the GSBB programs in Florida and is offered through the Glenn Terrell Foundation (Moses). Due to the overwhelmingly positive results of parenting education programs on mother-child relationships and the outcomes of participants reported in the literature, implementing similar programs in a larger number of prisons would undoubtedly produce better outcomes for a greater number of families that are faced with maternal incarceration.

### **Implications and Summary**

Considering the influence of attachment relationships on young children and their future outcomes, the positive outcomes associated with the opportunities to bond during incarceration, and the reported successes of prison nurseries, child visitation programs, and parent education programs, it is critically important to develop, improve, and expand programming to improve outcomes for affected families. The welfare, economics, and safety of our communities may be at stake.

Specifically, the following previously discussed items are critical to consider when evaluating the state of maternal incarceration:

- Maternal incarceration is a growing problem impacting the lives of millions of people, and it has yet to be fully addressed in respect to mother-child attachment.
- Children affected by maternal incarceration are at risk for a myriad of problems due to separation, inconsistent placement, prior risk factors, and limited resources.
- Optimal mother-infant bonding is critical in developing or improving attachment relationships, and early bonding influences development throughout life.
- Addressing the several barriers to healthy attachment and optimal visitation could provide more mothers with access to their children during incarceration and could increase the available opportunities that contribute to developing secure attachment and healthy relationships.
- Reluctance from caregivers can influence mother-child relationships. It would be beneficial to address issues involving placement and caregivers within individual parenting programs.
- Parent education programs and consistent, frequent contact in an age-appropriate environment, improves mother-child relationships and future outcomes for affected families.

The preceding summary points to the need to expand current programming for incarcerated mothers. By expanding and implementing strategies that improve attachment and mother-child relationships, the damaging effects of this growing problem could be reduced and the future outcomes of children, their mothers, and their communities could be improved. Family experiences in childhood often dictate the future experiences of the individual. For this reason, intervention that minimizes the risk factors that lead to intergenerational dysfunction and incarceration is critical in reducing the impact of this cycle.

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