

When Dad is in jail... How to prevent problems with adaptation in the children?

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“When your Dad goes to prison, you don’t see him as often, and at first I only saw him through glass (...) it isn’t easy seeing him behind glass and it’s very hard to say your dad is in jail. For how long? You don’t know (...) you know, he’s my Dad, and that won’t change my feelings for him, no matter what he did...”
(Child of an incarcerated father)

The scientific community accepts the fact that the incarceration of a parent is an event that is hardly mundane, affecting the lives of children profoundly. In spite of the focus this study has given to incarcerated mothers in the last few years, we are noticing an increase in researchers and counsellor groups in widening the study to include incarcerated fathers. In the last two years, the project “*Grandir sainement avec un père détenu*”, has been documenting this situation, and has been working on the development of a solid support base for those who are touched by this reality. In phase one of the project, the results from the study, and interviews done by psycho social counselors and the families thusly affected, have shown that a father’s incarceration affects the family as a whole and, particularly, the children. These children suffer in effect from their father’s absence and, in certain cases, may develop serious psycho social problems if sufficient support is not given in time. The project “*Grandir sainement avec un père détenu*” second year was thus characterized by the implementation of programs aimed at preventing these psycho social adaptation problems from arising in the children of incarcerated fathers (children’s section), and to improve the fathers parental skills (fathers section). This article is a synthesis of the studies primary result’s in the course of its two years.

Why intervene on behalf of families and children who’s father has been incarcerated?

In our federal penitentiaries, more than half of all male prisoners’ have children or step-children (Floran, 1995). Further more, from 12.1% to 32.1% of the children who are in the care of Quebec’s child services have a parent who has had judicial troubles (Pauzé, Toupin, Déry et Mercier, 2000). Thus, children who’ve had a parent who’s had judicial proceedings are a non negligible proportion of these children. However, there is little information at hand or resources to be had for the professionals who work with these children. There are also too few programs, projects or activities, aimed at helping these detained fathers and their children keep in touch with each other. Nevertheless, a father’s detention profoundly touches all members of a family. For these children, their father’s incarceration and absence are often viewed as a situation of abandonment. In some children, a father’s detention and resulting absence may result in serious repercussions that can cause psychological, behaviourism and social problems such as: anxiety, withdrawal, low self-esteem, scholastic difficulties, lack of discipline and delinquency (Simmons, 2000). In some cases, these children may turn to or have contact with gangs, and partake in illegal activities. Thus, when counselling isn’t offered in time, antisocial behaviour (stealing, lying) and “gang” activities might take root in some of these children.

A fathers’ incarceration has also shown to be a very trying experience for the mother’s of these children. These mothers must in effect deal with many difficult challenges (lack of financial resources, housing difficulties, raising the children alone, the children’s troubles, isolation and social branding...)

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which inevitably affect a mother's availability and the quality of the mother-child relationship, and this, when these children need particular attention and support (Carr, 1995).

For the detained father, incarceration proves to be a period with limited contact with their children. This separation, can in some fathers, engender feelings of loss, powerlessness and culpability. Many even feel guilty about having caused such an upheaval in their children's lives and in not being present to assume their parental responsibilities (Lanier, 1995).

Similar reports were obtained by the qualitative interviewing, in phase 1 of the project, of detained fathers (n=19), mothers (n=6), children (n=2) and counsellors (n=9) (see Barette, Lafortune, Baillargeon, Brunelle, Plante et al., 2002). According to those interviewed, the trials that afflict families of detained fathers can be regrouped into three stages, the arrest, the incarceration and the release from imprisonment. The arrest and consequent proceedings constitute situations judged to be difficult moments for all members of the family because they produce disequilibrium in the family unit to which are often juxtaposed different difficulties such as: the proceedings' publicity, lack of information, length of the judicial proceedings and financial difficulties.

The separation that is caused by the incarceration disrupts a family's cohesiveness and engenders personal (fear of break-up, definite break-up, depression, feelings of powerlessness, guilt, solitude, melancholy and sadness), economic (reduction of a family's revenue, trouble paying rent, food etc.) and social (social branding) difficulties to all of a family's members. Difficulties to the relationship (ties with the mother), geographical and institutional situation (inflexible visitation hours, inadequate visiting rooms, the cost of phone calls and travel) also arise, influencing, even breaking, a family's cohesion during the incarceration.

The release from prison also constitutes a trying time of adaptation for all family members. This adaptation translates for many mothers into a reorganisation of the habits they had established during the course of the father's incarceration, and by the differences noted in the relationship (fear of losing their newly acquired self-reliance, conflicts resulting from differences in child education). The children, for their part, deal with feelings of insecurity linked to the fear of losing their father once again. For the father's part, liberation is a time to renew ties with family and children and a new awareness of his lifestyle. On this note, many fathers have mentioned feeling like a "stranger" within their own families. Others have noted that they hadn't realised the effect their incarceration had on their children and realise how little they know about their children's development and evolution. In the face of these problems, some fathers show an interest in learning more about their parental role and a child's development. On this subject, Drapeau (2003) mentioned during a seminar "*La prévention des problèmes d'adaptation chez les enfants dont le père est détenu*" that it has been proven pertinent to intervene on behalf of families living important transitional situations (birth, separation, divorce...) because they're often more open to receive and participate in the services offered for support on the family level. The moment of liberation represents a turning point and context for transition and an important reorganisation, fathers most probably will be quite open to receiving support and counsel in this sense.

How to intervene on behalf of the incarcerated father?

One of the first actions posed to prevent the problems related to adaptation in children whose father has been incarcerated and to favour the reinsertion into society of these detained fathers has been the implementation of the project "*Père/Enfant*" (*Father/Child*) in three half-way houses of Quebec (*Carpe Diem*, Laval ; *Le Joins-Toi*, Granby ; *Maison Radisson Inc.*, Trois-Rivières). This program aims, by way of workshops and activities, to better their parental knowledge and competence of detained fathers as well as develop their abilities in creating harmonious familial relationships. The workshops focus on the following themes: the paternal role, function and engagement, the development phases of children and adolescents, the impact of separation and of the incarceration, the problems related to adaptation of children as well as a few practical suggestions for the parents.

To better appreciate the quality of the projects implementation, the first evaluation has been

realized thanks to the comments from both the professionals and fathers (see Barette, Dubeau, Bellemare, Brunelle, Cusson, Lafortune et Plourde, 2003). According to the counsellors who were consulted, the project corresponds to the specific needs of the detained fathers and to the realities of the differing environments. Implementing these projects that aim at reinforcing the ties between father and child as well as augment the parental knowledge and competence of detained fathers has proven to be a good strategy. The counsellors also stress the importance of the project's flexibility such as:

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thematic variation, the number of workshops offered as well as the adaptation of conditions to the animation characteristics of participants (number, ages and sexes of the children, ties with the mother, and the availability of visitation privileges with the children...).

The interviews given by the fathers participating in the project also confirm the high level of satisfaction for most of them. They confirm having acquired the knowledge and tools permitting them to better understand and interact with their children. Others have mentioned that the workshops permitted them to revise and confirm their knowledge. The workshops that proved to be the most interesting for the participants were those pertaining to the development of the child and adolescent as well as those pertaining to the impacts of separation and of the incarceration. Among the criticisms identified amid the participants, it was mentioned that they had a hard time dealing with the lack of participation of some of the participants and the limited number of participants itself. This last element is important to consider in the implementation of this program into the transitional houses of Quebec, as only 10 of the 22 participants were able to follow through and complete the project. Many reasons explain the frequent departure of transitional house clients: return to the penitentiary (n=5); total liberation (n=3); conflict with work schedule (n=3); and exclusion (n=1).

On the whole, the appreciation for the project “*Père/Enfant*” (*Father/Child*) that was expressed by the participants incites us to maintain these activities. The evaluations' preliminary results suggest the need to make the following minor adjustment: revise our strategies concerning recruitment and adhesion to the project; develop a partnership with judicial and youth organisations in order to aid fathers and children in renewing contact; to count on a greater participation on the part of mothers to the workshops in order to create more harmonious relations between family members and to adapt the terminology and animation of the workshops to facilitate the comprehension of said workshops.

How to intervene on behalf of the children of incarcerated fathers?

The work done by the groups working with detained fathers has shown the necessity to consult with, and create a partnership with the professionals and half-way counsellors in order to offer services that are tailored to the needs of the milieu and to their clients. This strategy (information, sensitisation, consultation, participation in the projects implementation) having proven to be successful in the implementation of the intervention program (fathers section), a similar approach imposes itself in the development of programs aimed at the prevention of problems of adaptation in the children whose father is incarcerated (children's section).

Thus, in spring of 2003, the seminar for exchange and discussion “*La prévention des problèmes d'adaptation chez les enfants dont le père est détenue*” was set up. That seminar was aimed at sensitizing

the professionals of the importance of renewing father-child ties, of knowing the new ways of intervening or acting as well as developing a partnership with youth organisations.

In all, around twenty professionals participated in the seminar and shared their expert opinion on the subject. The workshops, made up of ten participants, aimed at collecting the following data: the proportion of children and adolescents having lived through a fathers incarceration; the necessity to intervene on behalf of these children and adolescents; the obstacles that must be taken into account when intervening with them and finally the best way to intervene with children and adolescents.

The comments collected at the seminar made it possible to establish that children with an incarcerated father constitute a minority, but nonetheless non-negligible, proportion of the clientele of the represented organisations. However, according to the professionals that were encountered, intervention has been proven to be pertinent on behalf of children and adolescents. It is the youth centers mandate to support and to promote the services provided to children that have an incarcerated father. Those children desired, for the most part, to maintain the ties with their fathers (even if he is incarcerated), suffer from their fathers absence, from social branding, and shame at the fact that their father is incarcerated, they may develop problems on the psycho social level. If it is important to intervene, it is not suitable to do so in all situations. The professionals believe that it is counter-productive to promote the relationship between father and child when the father is implicated in a case of familial violence, sexual delinquency and when the father is a repeat-offender.

The seminar permitted to demonstrate that the counsellors at youth centers have a great need of tools in order to support their interventions with the children and adolescents. Comparatively to the intervention project (fathers section), the prevention project (children's section) gave rise to many questions on how to intervene (criteria for inclusion or exclusion, consent, methods of intervention, social branding...). These questions are no strangers to the resistance expressed by some professionals in the integration of the paternal unit in these interventions (paternal characteristics and the security of the mother or of the child; the complexities inherent in the consideration of the needs and realities, sometimes divergent, of the different family members...). The oppositions are mostly due to the fact that there is a lack of information pertaining to incarcerated fathers and on the penal environment as well as doubts as to the validity of promoting father-child relationships in this context.

The program for the prevention of problems of adaptation in children whose father is incarcerated (children's section) is presently in development. The aims of this program conform to the solutions that were identified by the participants of the seminar by concentrating on the sensitization of the professionals and youth counsellors that are liable to intervene on the part of the children of incarcerated parents. To do so, these five different approaches will be exploited:

- the creation of an information and sensitization kit intended for the professionals and counsellors (milieu of incarceration, conditions of the incarceration, the impacts of separation and incarceration, services available for these families...);
- the production of a sensitizing kit for the children (interactive tools such as cartoons, books, video...);
- the elaboration of a common protocol and of a concerted effort from the different milieus;

- the implementation of liaison services between the police forces (arrest), penitentiaries (incarceration, release) and the youth organisations in order to favour the rekindling of father-child ties;
- the sensitization of the populace and political institutions to these children's and adolescents that live with incarcerated father's reality.

Right now, a committee consisting of members participating in the project and clinicians has been formed to elaborate an information kit and the guidelines, that will facilitate the intervention with the children and the fathers (four points will be approached : prison environment, the impacts of the separation following the incarceration, the risk that there will be an intergenerational transmission of a criminal nature and the circumstances that could bring about the necessity of mediation for the family). To make sure that the tools correspond to their needs, consultation processes will be done with different professionals. However, our first efforts will be directed toward the counsellors at the youth centers that are already involved with the children and teenagers of incarcerated parents and that are at risk of developing adaptation difficulties.

Finally, we cannot but wish that the creation of the second section of the project “Grandir sainement avec un père détenu” that consists in preventing the adaptation problems for the children that live with an incarcerated father (section child) provoke good results for the children that live with this reality, which they often try to hide.

Authors notes:

The team for the project “Grandir sainement avec un père détenu” also include the following people: Daniel Bellemare, general manager, *Maison Radisson Inc.* ; Jean-François Cusson, *Association for the social habilitation in Québec (ASRSQ)* ; Diane Dubeau, external appraiser and teacher-researcher, *University of Quebec in Outaouais*, and Chantal Plourde, teacher-researcher, at the psychoeducation department, *University of Quebec in Trois-Rivières*.

Note:

These people came primarily from the youth centers (Mauricie, Montréal, Québec), the school environment and universities, and from a family house, the *Pivot jeunesse*, from *Le Centre de detention du Québec*, from *Regroupement canadien d'aide aux familles des détenus* and from *Continuité familles auprès des détenu(es)*.

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