

FEBRUARY  
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Issue 5



Children and Youth  
**S.U.N. SHINE**  
Seen Understood & Nurtured

# S.U.N. SHINE

## News

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE NEW YORK INITIATIVE FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

This issue discusses Right #4 of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights:

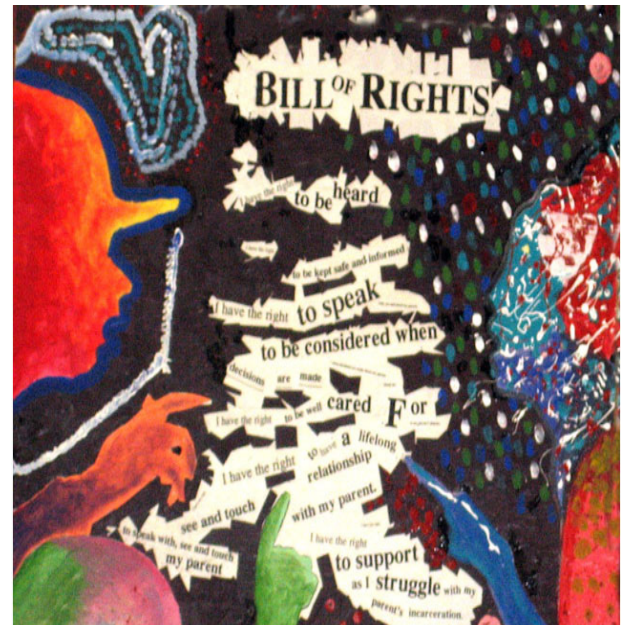
### “I HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE WELL CARED FOR IN MY PARENT’S ABSENCE.”

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

A child’s life is not suddenly suspended or put on hold when a parent becomes absent from their lives. Children continue to require nurturing, guidance, encouragement, a loving embrace and someone to tell them that they matter. Obviously this is best done by an involved and caring parent. For this reason, when a parent is incarcerated, it is very important to provide opportunities for parent-child contact which, particularly when supported by the caregiver, can leave the child feeling well-cared for. When the caregiver can be supported, themselves, to support the child, and if additional supports can be put in place, the child benefits from a network that embodies the true spirit of the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” One example of a community effort to create such a support network is the St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church of Ridgefield, Connecticut whose members—along with many other local volunteers—have opened their homes to children of mothers incarcerated at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York.

Bedford Hills, a maximum security prison for women located about 60 miles from NYC, incarcerates 820 women, many of whom are serving lengthy sentences about 571 (70%) of whom are also mothers. The Children’s Center at Bedford Hills directed by Bobby Blanchard, operates a summer program that allows children to spend four consecutive days (Sunday through Thursday) with their mothers. The Children’s Center is a program of the Catholic Charities Diocese of Brooklyn/ Queens and has served the Bedford Hills’ prison for over 25 years. While children spend the day “inside” with their mothers involved in camp-like activities such as arts and crafts, and relay races they stay with “host families” each evening, many of whom are parishioners of St. Stephens. The children live with the host families for 4 days during which they spend their days with their mothers. Hosting the children is a transformational experience for the children and their host family— it’s an opportunity to make new friends, build lasting relationships, and leave children feeling well cared for.

For information about other supportive programs for children of incarcerated parents, or to share a story from your program, please email Will Norris: [wnorris@osborneny.org](mailto:wnorris@osborneny.org)



## CHECK IT OUT!

The Sunday New York Times Magazine (1/11/09) featured an article called “Visiting Day” written by Binnie Kirshenbaum. This article compared the experiences of a young boy going to visit his mother who is incarcerated at Bedford Hills with a young woman going to visit her mother and shop for antiques. It raised awareness about the different experiences children have and about the pain involved with being separated.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11lives-t.html>

## Practice Tip: History & Hope

When he became President of South Africa, in 1994, Nelson Mandela said, “In my country we go to prison first, and then become President.” As we begin a new year with a new President, share an inspiring story with a young person that encourages them to dream and set a goal.



# Makeba's Corner

This column will feature advice and editorials from Makeba, Youth Specialist with the Osborne Association.

**Dear Makeba,**

## How do I talk with youth about the issue of parental incarceration?

First it is important to keep in mind that children of incarcerated parents are:

Like all other children—they want to be loved and have security.

Like some other children—they identify with other children of incarcerated parents.

Like no other children—the experience of parental incarceration is unique and different for each child.

There are many ways to create a safe environment so youth feel comfortable talking about their situations. Here are just 3 examples, for the complete list of 10, please email me at [mlavan@osborneny.org](mailto:mlavan@osborneny.org). Let me know what you think!

- 1) Assess your own values and Beliefs regarding incarcerated people and their families. You could be unintentionally conveying judgment.
- 2) Commit to being an active, open listener. Let the youth lead the conversation. Don't press an issue for your personal purposes or curiosity.
- 3) Be conscious of your language (including body language). Words like inmate, ex-offender, convict, murderer can be alienating for children whose parents are described this way. Use inclusive language that stresses the humanity of the person such as parent who is incarcerated, a person who is formerly incarcerated.

## ACTION CENTER

### Do you have books that your children no longer read that are in good condition?

Consider making a donation to a prison Children's/Family Center or a prison or jail nursery program. Books can be wonderful ways for parents and children to connect and they also promote reading which supports children's educational advancement. To find out more, please contact Diana Ortiz at (718) 637-6560.

### Do you know a young person ages 14 to 21 who has or had an incarcerated parent?

Refer them to join the Youth Advisory Board, by emailing Makeba Lavan at [mlavan@osborneny.org](mailto:mlavan@osborneny.org).

## SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP: SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN BY SUPPORTING THEIR CAREGIVERS

In ensuring children feel well-cared for in their parent's absence, perhaps no one is more important than their caregivers. This can be the other parent, a relative, family friend, or foster parent. They meet the physical needs of the children in their care, but also the more invisible emotional and relational needs. This can mean accepting costly collect phone calls, spending weekends on long visiting lines and eating out of vending machines, helping children understand why their parent was just transferred hundreds of miles away, making visits impossible. Outside the foster care system, they do this with little to no financial support. Inside the foster care system, they may do this and also be asked to terminate the parent's rights in order to legally adopt the child because their parent's sentence may be deemed too long. According to the 1997 federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) the state is required to move towards terminating parental rights (TPR) when a child or children has been in foster care for 15 months of 22 months, permanently severing the legal parent child relationship. One answer to the financial hardships and these sometimes no-win "choices" is subsidized guardianship. Though NY State does not offer this, 35 states and the District of Columbia currently do offer some form of financial assistance to caregivers outside the child welfare system. The programs are all designed differently, but offer a cost-effective alternative to long term foster care, adoption subsidies, or youth "aging out" without a support system or family. Please see the Children's Defense Fund: [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).

## Article Synopsis

### The Incarcerated Child and the School System By Emani G. Davis and Dee Ann Newell Spring 2008

Every child deserves to be well cared for, this includes receiving a quality education and the support a child needs to be a successful learner. The challenges children of incarcerated parents face—if they are recognized at all—are often misunderstood. The impact of parental separation, the social stigma of parental incarceration and subsequent feeling of isolation can impact a child's ability to concentrate and learn. The effects of parental incarceration on a child are often missed or misunderstood by their teachers and school administrators leaving these children to fend for themselves and at a substantial disadvantage.



In an article written by Emani G. Davis and Dee Ann Newell, *The Incarcerated Child and the School System* this connection is explored. The authors assert that "...few schools are prepared to effectively respond to the needs of children with an incarcerated parent, not to mention the needs of those children who are also in the foster care system." As the authors describe, it is in the intersection of these systems that much work needs to be done. Concluding on a bright note, they state that the challenges before us "create a unique opportunity for collaboration among child welfare workers, school professionals, and the families and/or extended families of the children involved."

**For the full article, please see: "CW360: Children of Incarcerated Parents," University of Minnesota, Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare: [www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/cw360.PDF](http://www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/cw360.PDF)**