Notes/Discussions

Should Children Visit Their Parents in Prison?

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This preliminary note reports clinical interviews at the Oregon State Penitentiary with 22 children, ages 5 through 15, visiting their imprisoned fathers. A majority of these children were found to be socially isolated. All the children placed a high value on the prison visits, but also demonstrated a variety of conflicted feelings about their incarcerated father. These findings highlight the need for more data on children and families of imprisoned parents and for consistent and well-conceptualized policies of family visitation.

INTRODUCTION

Separation of children from their parents has long been of concern to both the mental health profession and the courts. Despite interest in this general area, the children of prisoner-parents undergo a wrenching separation, yet remain an overlooked group in our society. Little is known about the number of children left behind in this fashion or what could be done to help them. They are no one agency's or institution's concern. Punishment in the criminal justice system has traditionally been focused against the individual offender, with little regard to its wider effects on the offender's family and children (McGowan and Blumenthal, 1978).

The irony of the situation becomes apparent when we consider the finding of a consistently positive correlation between parole success and the maintenance of family ties while in prison. This relationship has held up for 45 years across very diverse offender populations and different locales (Holt & Miller, 1972; Morris, 1974). Yet, prevailing correctional policies either ignore this finding or inadvertently undermine the maintenance of strong family ties that might later help in lowering recidivism rates. There is simply no policy that relates the impact of criminal justice to family life.

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Our interest in the issue of how children reacted to the whole experience of the incarceration of a parent began when one of us had occasion to see several symptomatic children brought to a psychiatric outpatient facility soon after their fathers had been imprisoned. The rather sudden onset of aggressive and/or antisocial behavior in the pubertal-aged male child soon after the incarceration was striking. In families where imprisonment had been preceded by marital turmoil and followed by divorce, a followup study two years later showed that initially aggressive and/or antisocial children were now exhibiting chronic, serious psychopathology. Where family life was more stable and imprisonment had not been followed by divorce, the prognosis for these initially symptomatic children was more optimistic (Sack, 1977).

Additional recent studies by the authors (Sack, Seidler, & Thomas, 1976) and others (LaPoint, 1977; McGowan and Blumenthal, 1978) have documented the difficulties children face when a parent is incarcerated. Occasionally, children witness the arrest of a parent who is led away handcuffed with no time for explanation or consolation and no way of predicting the time of reunion. Children must also bear the curiosity and occasional taunting of peers. Society offers little in the way of recognition and/or condolence when such an event happens and many prisoner families try to hide the fact of confinement from both the children and the community.

During the course of the work mentioned above, the authors became increasingly aware of a wide mixture of feeling and lack of consistent policy or philosophy towards visitation of children in prisons. For instance, judges at times specifically order no children's visitation as part of the sentence itself. Social agencies also occasionally deny visitation because of its possible "bad" effects on children. Some prisoner-parents and their spouses voice the fear that their children would have to experience the same shame they did in the incarceration process and therefore request that their children not see them behind bars.

Furthermore, most states have no legal provisions that relate to the families and children of prisoners. Legislation and proposals for future legislation range from regulations that, under some circumstances, would terminate a parent's right during imprisonment to other regulations which would, for instance, permit a young child to reside in a correctional institution with the mother (Perlman, 1977; LaPoint, 1977).

Because little empirical evidence has yet been presented to deal with the question of a child's visit to prison, we are presenting these preliminary findings. Be reminded that our data come only from a sample of children who as a rule, had already established a regular, successful prison-visiting pattern, usually 2 to 4 times a month, that does not include a larger sample of children who make more sporadic visits or whose visiting might be disruptive.

This report describes data on 22 children from 13 families interviewed individually by one of the authors (WHS) whose fathers were confined at the Oregon State Penitentiary. (Other data about these children and their families can be found in Sack et al., 1976.) The 30-minute review, conducted in the visitor's waiting area of the penitentiary, was not intended to be comprehensive nor was it designed to result in a clinical diagnosis or systematic dynamic formulation. It was intended to evaluate such factors as the child's overall mood, the quality of the relationship between the child and the imprisoned father, the child's understanding of the reasons for imprisonment, and information about the visits themselves. All the children had had extensive contact with their father prior to this form of separation. Gathering data from a single in-
terview with a child is obviously fraught with hazards. Children would be expected to distrust such proceedings and feel it an invasion of privacy. Therefore, spurious answers might be elicited. Nevertheless, most of the children in this sample related well in the interview and some seemed eager to be able to talk about topics previously shrouded in uncertainty. While such material yields impressions rather than facts, the consistency of some of the findings make them worth reporting.

RESULTS

1. Overall impression: Sixteen of the 22 children were rated as showing some emotional problems of a mild degree as evidenced by overall anxiety and/or depression. None showed a severe illness such as a psychosis.

2. Social relationships: One of the most striking features of this group of children was their relative isolation in regard to peer relationships. Sixteen of the 22 children seemed outside the usual peer experiences. They could only name an occasional friend or describe only marginal social contacts. Six children flatly admitted they had no friends and four children stated that friends' parents would not allow them to come over to play because "Dad's in jail." Six described what was judged as normal peer contacts.

3. Ability to discuss the incarcerated parents: When the subject of the imprisoned father was raised, a sharp look of anxiety or rebuke such as, "We're not supposed to talk about him," was common. Bringing up the subject was an obvious taboo for many of the children. Attempts to elicit from the children their explanation for what had happened to the father and why brought forth a wide range of responses. Approximately 1/3 of them denied knowing much about the matter and/or refused to discuss it. Another 1/3 proffered explanations that were distorted versions designed to make the tragedy more bearable. Some examples illustrate this distortion mechanism: "He came here because he stole a watermelon." "He's here to work and earn money." The remaining 1/3 gave fairly clear and realistic explanation for confinement, its reasons and consequences. No correlation was established between the type of behavior shown by the children as reported by their parents and the explanations they actually gave in the interview. However, the 6 children who seemed to be the most well adjusted used some mechanism other than denial to explain their father's incarcerations. There were some parallels between the explanations given by the children and the explanations the parents said they had given their children. Many parents expressed astonishment that the emotional recontact with the father in prison could be so important to the child.

4. Dreams and future plans: Dream sequences related by these 22 children occasionally revealed methods they used to cope with a father who was now separated from them and was undergoing punishment. Nine of the 22 children could relate one of their recent dreams; in 5 of the 9, the dream seemed to deal directly with the father. For instance, one 6-year-old girl reported a recurrent dream in which she was "being chased by cops, so I ran to jail to escape, and the good cops in jail hid me from the bad cops who couldn't find me." A 7-year-old boy said he dreamed that "some people want to leave here, but my dad doesn't; he wants to stay. He likes it in jail but I wish he'd come home." Another boy of 7 denied that he knew what his father had done (he
had robbed a bank) but quickly recounted a dream about a bank robbery in which “my dad is the policeman who bangs the robbers over the head.” The dream thus allows the child to deny or deflect the painful reality of father as a prisoner and to maintain a more benign relationship by assigning him another role, frequently that of policeman.

This same trend was observed not only in the dreams but also in the boys' descriptions of what they wanted to be when they grew up. Five of the 10 boys interviewed indicated they would be policemen. Another said with an air of mischievous bravado that he would be a lawyer who “helps the bad guys get a break.” Identifying consciously and strongly with “law and order” was one way adopted by these boys to protect themselves from the danger of identifying with the antisocial behavior of their fathers. That such a danger exists is seen from the fact that several pubertal-aged children did evince antisocial symptoms soon after the incarceration.

One 15-year-old boy had a distinctive way of distancing himself from his father's prisoner status. He condescendingly described his father as a “dumb con artist who didn’t have enough sense to stay out of prison.” He elaborated his point in a flippant and casual manner, giving many examples of the stupidity of prisoners. The striking feature of his portrayal was the close resemblance between the style and manner of his speech and that of his father, even while he was trying to establish that he had little to do with his father. In many subliminal ways, this adolescent confirmed a feeling that in spite of his disparaging remarks about his father, he was strongly identified with him. He had already acquired the reputation as a disruptive class clown and had recently dropped out of high school.

5. Attitudes towards the visit itself: Here we obtained a uniformly positive response. The children claimed they looked forward to the visits and talked of their sad feelings at the time of departure. They seemed to take the atmosphere of the prison for granted. Parents reported that several children seemed less disruptive and “relieved” after making the first visit. Children enjoyed discussing their plans for what special things they would do when their father returned home. Some had a rather unrealistic if not grandiose quality, but such plans also had a defensive function of warding off the pain of separation. In no instance in this sample did children report the experience as negative nor did the parent report it as traumatic.

DISCUSSION

These preliminary findings indicate that the children of prisoners seem to be relatively isolated from usual social and peer relationships. Whether this was a result of the stigmatizing effects of the imprisonment itself or existed prior to the imprisonment as well, we cannot say. In a previous study dealing specifically with the children of prisoners (Friedman and Esselstyn, 1965), it was observed that teachers rated such children below average in social and psychological characteristics more frequently than comparable controls.

In addition to the isolation, children also experienced inner conflict over the imprisonment itself with the consequent separation from and punishment of the parent.
Faced with the dilemma of maintaining the inner image of the "good parent," now absent, the child is forced to acknowledge the painful reality of the current situation. Some families try to solve this dilemma for the child by preserving the "good parent" at the expense of reality. They either deny the imprisonment or disguise it in more palatable terms (hospital, camp, etc.). Other families see the imprisonment as the final resolution of marital conflicts and assign the blame accordingly. "He's the bad one and we'll have nothing more to do with him." Finally, some children handle the emotional conflict of losing a father to prison by identifying with the antisocial behavior of the father and becoming antisocial themselves or setting up strong defenses against it and aligning themselves in concrete ways with "law and order." In all cases, the child is forced to arrive at some understanding of and explanation for his father's situation and at the same time to further his development by attempting to maintain some positive relationship with his imprisoned father. This preliminary study gives some evidence of the way these children perceived the imprisonment of their father and ways they dealt with it. For them the visitation was an important link of continuity in their paternal relationship. Since their peer and general social relationships seemed so barren, this family tie may have been doubly important to them. It also seemed to help them come to terms with conflicts they experienced over this form of separation and perhaps helped "square" the perception of the prisoner-parent in reality, with a more subjective, internalized "good parent." Moreover, visitation for the child may have counteracted initial frightening fantasies about the prison.

The small amount of data presented only underlines the importance of the question of visitation. It does not answer the question, nor does it provide sufficient data to formulate any more general prison policies about children's visitation. Empirical data need to be collected from larger samples in order to better describe a variety of psychosocial reactions in children and their families to prisoner-parent contacts. Data from new programs of family visitation should evaluate their specific effects on children as well as on adult relationships. Until more data are available, policies (or lack of them) towards this issue of visitation will remain marked by uncertainty, variability, and ambivalence.

Whose ultimate responsibility are these children? How far can or should the state modify punishment because an offender has children? How much responsibility does the criminal justice system have for children and families left behind when a parent is placed behind bars (Polier, 1978)? Such larger questions lie behind the more immediate visitation issue.

Be reminded that potentials for abuse of visitation exist and are well known to those working within penitentiary walls. For instance, children have been used as vehicles for drug and alcohol smuggling. When some physical contact has been granted in the visit situation, prisoner and visitor have been known to engage in open sexual behavior in front of their children. Most frequently, children have been ignored by the prisoner-parent and this, coupled with lack of facilities and supervision, had led to disruptive behavior such as fighting with other children. LaPoint (1977) notes in her recent study that a number of mother prisoners simply do not know how to relate to their children. Thus, the visitation question needs further examination in terms of its
realistic consequences, as well as its intended goals. Be that as it may, society should not continue to ignore nor inadvertently punish this group of children by neglect and oversight for the past sins of their parents.

REFERENCES