

Creating Conditions that Promote Safety, Healing, and Growth in Child-Parent Visits

Transcript

Kathleen Guarino:

My name is Kathleen Guarino, and I'm with the American Institutes for Research or AIR. As part of our work, AIR supports organizations and systems serving populations with high rates of trauma to adopt a trauma-informed approach to programming and policy. In this video, we're focusing on what it looks like to integrate a trauma-informed approach to child-parent visits in corrections facilities. Children who've been separated from their parents due to incarceration often experience negative health and social outcomes such as performing poorly in school, and parents can find it challenging to maintain a healthy relationship with their children while incarcerated. For children whose parents are incarcerated, including older children and young adults, visits are a really important way to maintain the parent-child relationship and help promote family connections that are so critical to health, well-being, and positive long-term outcomes for children and their families. For parents, visits are also associated with better behavior and outcomes during incarceration and after release.

However, we know there are many aspects of child-parent visits that can be stressful. Children may find visiting a prison or jail frightening and experience feelings of confusion, sadness, anger, or grief associated with being separated from their parent. Parents and caregivers may worry about supporting children's emotional needs, maintaining a relationship and managing their own emotions related to seeing their children and navigating this separation. Correction staff may also find the visitation process stressful due to the strong emotions they can elicit, the additional supports they can require, and the safety and contraband risks that come with all activities where outside visitors come into the facility. Given the importance of child-parent visits, and the potential stress associated with these visits, it's helpful for facilities to adopt trauma-informed visitation practices that help to create the conditions to foster parent-child relationships, and minimize the potential for further stress or harm. Adopting a trauma-informed approach to child-parent visits involves one, realizing the prevalence of trauma in the lives of parents who are incarcerated and their children.

Second, it's about recognizing the effects of trauma on incarcerated parents and their children and on their relationships with each other. Third, it's about responding by adopting trauma-informed visitation practices, processes, and policies. And finally, it's about resisting inadvertently creating environments or situations that re-traumatize parents or their children by making them feel helpless, vulnerable, frightened, or out of control in ways that mimic past traumatic experiences. With an awareness and understanding of trauma and its impact, corrections facilities can work to integrate visitation practices that foster safety and connection for children visiting their parents, and when possible, create an environment where healing and resilience building is supported. While the practices we'll be talking about in this video are focused specifically on child parent visits and related processes, facilities may consider adopting a trauma-informed approach organization-wide to have the greatest reach and impact. Trauma-informed approaches can be valuable from the smallest of day-to-day interactions to the highest level of procedure and policy. So we encourage you to reflect on how you can integrate this thinking and approach at all levels.

Jessica Lee:

Here in Virginia, we are so fortunate. We have a leadership that really is committed to creating a healing environment. Our mission here in the Virginia Department of Corrections is helping people to be better.

What does that mean? That means staff, that means anyone under our care, whether that's inmates or probationers, if that's anyone interfacing with our agency. And so our leadership was very committed to interrupting the generational cycles of crime. And how do you do that? You work through prevention. Of course, you make sure that we have safe, secure facilities, but you also make sure that the practices and the programs are aligned with best practices.

We've done a lot of campaigning, if you will, and a lot of educating and explaining that this is not about making a softer environment. If anything, it's creating a safer environment. It's also making your offender population more manageable. And when you create a trauma-informed care space for other people, for children and for families, in turn, your staff are going to have a more positive working environment. And so we developed an hour and a half virtual training that's realistic. After we developed this great training, our leadership said that they needed to make sure visitation staff was going to have access to watching it, so they made a commitment. All visitation staff must watch the training and understand the material.

Christopher Walton:

We have staff go through training so they know how to actually deal with children, talk to them at their level, make it more comfortable for a child to come into visitation because it's a very traumatizing environment. This training for staff is mandatory for those who are actually working visitation so they can understand some of the different ways they can actually improve the relations with families.

Kathleen Guarino:

Family visits are an important and meaningful experience. They can also be a source of stress and anxiety. That's why it's important to include trauma-informed practices in every step.

Portia O'Neal:

We understand that a visit to a correctional center may already be traumatizing. The last time that that young child may have had any interaction with law enforcement, may have been at the arrest event of their incarcerated loved one. So we're always taking into consideration how we greet the visitors, especially minor children, how we process them through security checkpoints and all the interventions that we do or interactions we have with them throughout the course of their visit. It's extremely important to us that we allow that family to have that time to bond and reestablish connection without causing further traumatization.

Christopher Walton:

One of the things that we did is they have a video that we show in front entry, and it's a cartoon. And it helps kids to understand what they expect when they go to the back. Another thing that we've done is we've revamped the visiting rooms and making more child-friendly. In the visiting rooms, we have pictures, we have animals, you have whales, you have a lot of things that kids see in school or they might see at the community center. All three of these facilities have been revamped. They have colors on the walls, animals on the walls, things kids can recognize, and it's just more pleasing for a child and the family members when they come to visitation.

Portia O'Neal:

Allowing them to say, "Hey, if you stand with your arms out, we're going to wind you, you are going to walk through this metal detector." And it may be just giving them kind of pointers and hints before we actually start doing things. We're also going to give them gentle reminders. We have a video that we

play at the beginning in the visitation process. While they're waiting, so we're going to give them reminders of, you may want to go to the bathroom because you don't want to shorten your visit with your mom or your dad. Anything from you may see a dog that's working, but he's going to be actually working so he won't be able to play with that animal.

Madison Hammett:

Having a staff member or volunteer ready to clearly and calmly explain each step of the process can help ease children's fears. For example, simply saying something like, you'll have to wait here first and then you'll go through another check-in, can go a long way towards calming nerves. Prepare staff with script ideas and discussions about ways that they can help set a welcoming tone for children and caregivers. Staff should also be prepared for a range of emotions from parents, children, and caregivers, and think about the supports that they can offer. Focus on relationship building, not dictating behavior.

While a family visit can be exciting for parents, it can also be something that brings up a lot of emotions, including guilt, shame, or sadness. There might also be anger from the child because their parent has been away. It is important to remember that all of these are normal responses. Being prepared for potential negative emotions can provide a healthy space for these to occur and be addressed and acknowledged rather than be diminished or stifled.

Staff can also help parents prepare logistically by co-planning a list of topics to cover with caretakers and children in advance of the visit. For example, depending on the age of the child, they may be confused about certain rules like no hugs or why a guard is present.

Kathleen Guarino:

Staff can continue to support the parent-child visit with clear and compassionate communication methods.

Christopher Walton:

We're not telling anybody not to focus on security, that's number one. But we also want to make the situation more pleasant for the family members and the children to come to see their parents. We have a lot of kids that have ACEs, adverse childhood experiences, and they go through those situations. One of the biggest ones they have is seeing their parent get incarcerated. So whatever we can do to support families and support that process is always going to be a good thing.

Portia O'Neal:

As officers are making rounds of visitation room, not be afraid to stop and talk to the minor children, just a simple, Hey, how are you doing? If they're playing a board game, just kind of joking around with them and saying, Hey, look like you got a good move there. Being able to have those kind of conversations to help change that narrative of this is law enforcement. They're here to keep my loved one away from me.

Madison Hammett:

Once it's time for the visit to end, and the family has said their goodbyes, staff can continue to support children as they and their caregivers leave. Just as the opening of a visit can set the tone for the day, the closing period can stay with a child long after leaving the facility. It is not unusual for children to still need some support regulating their emotions as they say goodbye. There might be crying, refusal to leave, or outbursts of anger as the visit ends. If it looks like parents and caregivers are struggling to help

children depart, staff can step in with supportive words and guidance through the rest of their time there. Remember, you don't want to make threats or intimidate the child. Instead, think about the ways that you can acknowledge their feelings while moving them on to the next step of closing the visit.

With younger children, it can be helpful to give them a task to help move them forward. For example, I know it's really sad to leave your dad, especially since you were such an awesome visitor with us today, but can you give your dad one last hug and then help me get you and your mom checked out?

Correction staff can provide support for incarcerated parents after a visit in a few ways. As we discussed, there are a lot of emotions that can come up for a parent during a family visit, guilt, shame, anger, sadness, and in the aftermath of a visit, these emotions can feel especially raw. Allow time for the parent to process these emotions and if possible, provide a supportive space for the parent to express them before going back to their unit.

Take time to process the visit with parents and discuss what, if any, follow-up needs to be completed. Did they and the guardian discuss custody? Did they talk about different communication schedules? Like phone calls? Make sure that the parent has the support or resources they need to complete these tasks. Importantly, make sure that they too have the support and resources they need to follow up with their child. Many facilities are working to ensure that the relationship between families and their loved ones who are incarcerated stays strong even in long periods of separation. For some facilities, this might look like staying in communication with families directly, however, that is not always possible or what's healthiest.

So make sure to work with families on the communication plan that works best for them. Another method is to work on identifying community partners that can assist in supporting children of incarcerated parents and connecting families. These organizations and initiatives can provide linkages and programming for parents and families to stay connected and involved to support their children best.

Portia O'Neal:

For staff, we really are in contact with them and we try to see what they need. So it may not be something that we can provide here at the facility, but local resources in the area that they live in and say, "Hey, I've got an issue with transportation." We may say, "Okay, this is the organization that can help you." And it can run anything from clothing to housing, employment, any resources that we can help link them to. We definitely try to do that.

Dana Ratliffe-Walker:

We are evidence based. And so the important thing is that we ensure that we concentrate on safety, empowering the participants of the program and ensuring that there is an engagement from the beginning to the end. One of the tips that I would give to other facility heads would be to reach out to your community stakeholders because there are plenty of them out in your community. They are just waiting for us to make contact with them. I would also recommend ensuring that we tap into the resources of the staff that are already on board. And thirdly, I would say that ensure that you do have a funding source. Initially to begin the program, there needs to be upfront resources and your community stakeholders are your best avenue in order to get those resources.

Jessica Lee:

Really want to emphasize that people want to do good things, especially for people who are incarcerated. And so it's important for the correctional system to understand that and be a part of that process. And so we would not be anywhere without our village.

Portia O'Neal:

Our buy-in, it started with kind of a culture shift in our department. So we have leadership that was extremely supportive, and they understood what it meant to do an initiative like this. And so really that was very beneficial to us because coming from the top down, it's like, yes, okay, we're going to do this, but here's why. So our organization, it's what we would call a learning organization. So we're constantly looking at trends. We're constantly looking at what evidence is, what research evidence are out there and what they're saying. And so we know that reestablishing a bond with the incarcerated parent has a lot of benefits for the child and the family.

And lastly, the inmate, that keeps them from coming back to prison in certain cases. So being able to have a leadership that says, we support this and how can we make this happen, really was beneficial. And then also once we started to make the change, the building was here already, but to make the physical change and to put decorations on the wall and really design it with trauma-informed care approach in mind, and having staff come through and be a part of that process.

Jessica Lee:

First thing I think that you want to do is listen to the voices of those that matter. So getting together with a dialogue or a work group of incarcerated people to hear their voice of what would be meaningful to them, and also hear from families, especially young people, and find out what would be helpful to them. I think the other thing I would think about is making sure that you're sending a message. Leadership has to show their support, and explain the why's, especially in a correctional system of how this does not jeopardize security, but it actually enhances security and actually makes us more productive as an agency. I think the other thing that I think is important is to make sure that when you're looking at space, you're really looking at being diverse. You want to make sure that you're hitting genders and age groups. You want to make sure that the space is going to be resembling, I guess, the people that are going to be visiting it.

Christopher Walton:

I would encourage people invest in trauma-informed care training, invest in revamping the visiting room. If you are in the Department of Corrections, it's worthwhile. It's something you need to do.

Portia O'Neal:

Look at various states and reach out to individuals and see how they really were able to manage that process. The good thing about it is collaboration doesn't necessarily have to be in the state or the local region that you're in, especially if you know of programs that are successful. So I would definitely reach out to those people who started from the beginning or brought something back that was maybe dormant for a while, and they decided to re-energize it, reach out to those individuals for sure.

Kathleen Guarino:

Today we talked about trauma-informed strategies for supporting parent-child visits in corrections facilities. As we mentioned at the beginning of this video, ideally, a trauma-informed approach is something that is adopted organization-wide and informs all programming processes, procedures, and policies. This might look like considering how staff are trained and supported in both adopting trauma-informed practices, and in managing their on-the-job stressors, how the physical environment looks, what types of services and supports are offered to those who are incarcerated, and what types of procedures and policies are adopted. The ultimate goal really is to create an environment where people,

particularly those affected by trauma, are most likely to meet their desired outcomes. This involves systems-level change in which all participate and all benefit.

There are many ways that you as correction staff can integrate knowledge about trauma-informed practice into your parent-child visitation process to best support incarcerated parents and their families in your particular context. For more information and resources, visit youth.gov/CIP and the National Institute of Corrections at NICIC.gov and view the Children of Incarcerated Parents Topics page.