Foster Parenting the Children of Incarcerated Parents

Introduction

Caring for a child whose parent is in prison generally raises new and difficult issues for the foster parent. There is the problem of how to talk to the child about the parent and the circumstances that led the parent to jail. There may be concerns about the child's visits to the prison and the effects of these visits upon his* behavior. Also, there is the problem of communication between the foster parents and the natural parent. Limited telephone access and physical distance present real obstacles. In addition foster parents may need to overcome their own fearful and anxious feelings before being able to work with an incarcerated person.

It is helpful to remember that in almost all cases the parent has not been separated from the child because of poor parenting, abuse or neglect. The parent, in spite of a criminal conviction may have been a good parent with a close relationship between herself and her child. Indeed, the incarceration itself may intensify a parent's interest in her child and raise feelings of jealously toward the child's caretakers. The child himself is likely to have strong feelings of love and loyalty for the absent parent and may look toward the foster family for some validation of these positive feelings.

Consequently, the ideal fostering situation is one where a balance is struck between the natural and foster parents with each being fully supported by the other. The incarcerated parent has to realize that the foster parent is there to give day to day care and support, and that this can be done far more easily if they hold the natural parent's respect and confidence. On the other hand, the foster family has to be aware that the natural parent loves her child and wants to maintain and exercise interest in the youngster's development.

In the pages that follow we will look more closely at three important issues; accurate explanations, visits, and communication between foster and natural parents. Certainly these are not the only issues that arise, but it has been our experience that they are major areas to be dealt with and, if handled well, provide a sound basis for subsequent good interactions.

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* Note: For ease of reading we will use the male gender for children and female gender for the parent. However, what we are saying holds true for children of both sexes and for both incarcerated mothers and fathers.