

**Teens of Incarcerated Parents: A Group Counseling Intervention for
High School Counselors**

Jennifer Gerlach
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Abstract

Children and adolescents who experience parental incarceration are faced with significant challenges. Additionally, parental incarceration disproportionately affects African American families and families in urban settings. Due to institutional, economic, and social barriers, access to community mental health services for these affected children and teens is often limited. However, professional school counselors (PSCs) are positioned to fill the gap in services and provide much needed support for these students. This article presents a six-session, small counseling group plan for high school PSCs working with teenagers of incarcerated parents. Additional considerations related to prescreening participants and collecting data are also provided.

Keywords: incarceration, school counseling, adolescents and teenagers, group counseling

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Children of incarcerated parents experience many additional academic and social obstacles compared to their peers who do not have experienced parental incarceration (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010; Arditti & Salva, 2015; Casey, Schlafer, & Masten, 2015; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Turney, 2017). Offenders in the criminal justice system tend to come from urban, low-income, and minority urban areas (Graff, 2015; Simes, 2018), and according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), Black/African American offenders are incarcerated at much higher rates than White offenders (2018a). This racial disparity perpetuates social, economic, and educational inequities, which permeates the family structure (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014; Western & Pettit, 2010). Additionally, Black/African American children and low-income families are less likely to seek and have access to mental health services (Bains, 2014; Hatcher, King, Barnett & Burley, 2017; Kugelmass, 2016). Given the number of incarcerated parents and the limited access to mental health support, school counselors are encouraged to identify affected teens and provide much needed support. This article describes a six-session group for high school aged teens of incarcerated parents that may be implemented by a high school counselor. It is adapted from a bereavement counseling group model conducted where parental incarceration is considered as a type of non-death related loss (Humphrey, 2009).

More than 1.5 million people were incarcerated in state and federal correctional facilities in 2016 (BJS, 2018b). Parental incarceration can have detrimental effects on children's well-being with consequences reaching into adulthood (Siennick, 2016).

These children generally have unmet mental and physical health needs (Turney, 2017), are more likely to befriend peers who exhibit antisocial behaviors (Cochran, Siennick, & Mears, 2018), and report frequent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (Smith & Young, 2017; Thurman, Johnson, Gonzalez, & Sales, 2018). Additionally, parental incarceration is a risk factor for elevated trauma symptoms (Arditti & Salva, 2015), homelessness (Casey et al., 2015), delinquency (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010), and criminal offending (Mears & Siennick, 2016). Moreover, children of incarcerated parents are less engaged in school activities, report more discipline issues, experience an overall diminished sense of belonging at school, and are less likely to receive formal education as adults (Cochran et al., 2018; Mears & Siennick, 2016; Smith & Young, 2017).

Though parental incarceration affects all children, it disproportionately affects Black/African American youth due to systemic racial inequities (Miller, 2007) and income disparities (Raybuy & Kopf, 2015). While incarceration rates have declined (BJS, 2018b), the Black/African American incarceration rate is 3.5 times higher than the White incarceration rate (BJS, 2018a) and 40% of all incarcerated parents are Black/African American males (Martin, 2017). Even more alarming, Wildeman (2009) estimates that 25% of Black/African American children will experience parental incarceration by age 14. For Black/African American youth, parental incarceration was associated with negative outcomes, including increased likelihood of criminal justice involvement, increased drug use, and increased depressive symptoms (Kopak & Smith-Ruiz, 2016). According to Raybuy and Kopf (2015), the 2014 median income for incarcerated adults was \$19,185, approximately 41% less than that of non-incarcerated peers. Low income further exacerbates the lack of access to resources and, therefore,

makes the role of the school counselor more critical for providing support and services to these children and teens.

Approximately one in five teens experience a mental health issue that requires intervention, yet less than 20% of those in need receive mental health support (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Merikangas et al., 2010; Pew Research Center, 2016). Systemic issues specifically prohibit low-income families and Black/African American families from receiving community mental health services (Hines-Martin, Malone, Kim, Brown-Piper, 2003; Kugelmass, 2016). Additionally, Black/African American teens are less likely to ask for support due to shame, embarrassment, and distrust in the system (Bains, 2014). For the 80% of students who do not receive mental health support in the community, they rely on their school counselor to receive support services (Erford, 2015).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2012) states that professional school counselors (PSCs) are responsible for the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students. Counseling services are delivered in a variety of formats including individual counseling, small group counseling, and classroom guidance lessons (ASCA, 2012). Often as the only entry point to mental health access, ASCA recommends PSCs utilize all forms of service delivery for all three domains (ASCA; 2012; Kaffenberger & O'Rorke-Trigiani, 2013). Though this is the recommendation, there are inequities in the type and domain of service delivery across the K-12 spectrum.

At the high school level, PSCs are less likely to conduct small groups and often focus more on individual counseling than their elementary school peers (Dye, 2014).

Additionally, the focus in high school is more often directed toward academic performance and postsecondary plans (Dye, 2014; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). In a national survey of over 800 PSCs, incarceration was not listed among identified personal/social issues (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2007). During a review of the literature, only three articles were found related to small groups for children of incarcerated parents and all three were designed for elementary schools (Lopez & Bhat, 2007; Springer, Lynch, & Rubin, 2000; Springer, Pomeroy, & Johnson, 1999).

Group counseling provides numerous benefits and is an efficient method for school counselors. Because large caseloads are often cited as one of the barriers to providing counseling services in schools (Kaffenberger & O'Rorke-Trigiani, 2013), PSCs can utilize group counseling as a means to meet student needs. In addition to efficiency, group counseling can provide an opportunity for members to have a shared experience with others, learn new information, develop interpersonal skills, practice social skills, and encounter a sense of hope (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Practicing these skills is especially important because teens with incarcerated parents often befriend peers with antisocial behaviors, are less engaged in school, have higher rates of school discipline issues and increased chances of becoming involved in the justice system (Cochran et al., 2018; Mears & Siennick, 2016;).

Although children with incarcerated parents experience a reduced sense of school belonging (Cochran et al., 2018), they also report less sadness and hopelessness when being supported by their teachers (Thurman et al., 2018). Additionally, teens with incarcerated parents want to interact with professionals who

display authenticity, empathy, and warmth without being judged for their family situation (Johnson, 2012). When working with African American teens, PSCs must be cognizant of the cultural contexts of imprisonment, race, and systemic barriers to best counsel and advocate this subpopulation of teens (Graham & Harris, 2013; Western & Pettit, 2010). Thus, it is even more critical for PSCs to seek engagement and build relationships with this population.

Group Design Considerations

This group curriculum is structured to meet with students once a week for approximately 45 minutes. Because teachers and administrators may be hesitant to disrupt academic time, PSCs should make an effort to meet with students during non-academic time such as before school, after school, study halls, or even lunch periods. If academic time must be interrupted, PSCs, with student and parent consent, can offer the teachers or staff an in-person explanation of why the student needs to participate in this group. The in-person engagement with the teacher, as opposed to sending an email or hall pass asking to dismiss the student, helps highlight the importance of the group, builds relationships with faculty, and demystifies the PSC's role on campus. It is helpful to collect data and prescreen students in preparation for group implementation.

Data Collection

PSCs are encouraged to use various types of data to inform decisions as part of a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012). However, many PSCs neglect data collection and analysis because of poor self-efficacy or because they do not perceive the benefit of collecting data since their principals do not require it (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009; Watkinson & Gallo-Fox, 2015; Young &

Kaffenberger, 2011). Data should be used to help identify effectiveness of group, make changes for future groups, educate stakeholders on the PSC's role, and advocate for the profession. There are different types of data that include perception data, process data, and outcome data (Kaffenberger & Young, 2013).

Perception data. Perception data describes what people think, believe, or know (Kaffenberger & Young, 2013). Needs assessment is a type of perception data that can be used with students, parents, and faculty to help determine student needs. PSCs can administer student needs assessments to help identify various social and emotional issues and use Likert-type scales to have students rate their difficulty with various issues like divorce, parental incarceration, or grief and loss. PSCs can also notify parents and teachers that they are interested in offering small counseling groups on parental incarceration to solicit referrals from those sources as well.

In addition, a pretest-posttest survey can be used to measure the effectiveness of a counseling group. Assessments and surveys should be short and use clear and developmentally appropriate language (Studer, Oberman, & Womack, 2006). PSCs can use multiple-choice questions that are directly related to a session goal or topic, which can facilitate data analysis. The posttest should use the same questions as the pretest and incorporate additional open-ended questions for qualitative feedback (see Appendix A for sample pretest and posttest questions). PSCs can also complete a self-evaluation to assess the effectiveness of each session and whether session goals were met. In addition, school counselors may solicit feedback from the teachers of the group participants. This approach may promote support for the program from teachers. See Appendix B for a sample teacher evaluation.

Process data. Process data includes, but is not limited to, the number of students who participated; when the intervention occurred; and the duration, frequency, and intensity of the intervention (Kaffenberger & Young, 2013). PSCs can keep a record of how many students participated in the needs assessment and a disaggregated breakdown of the number of students answering each question. Finally, counselors should document how many students enrolled in the group. After the group begins, weekly attendance should be kept, tracking any patterns of attrition.

Outcome data. Lastly, outcome data takes a variety of forms and shows the impact of the intervention (Kaffenberger & Young, 2013). Outcome data includes, but is not limited to, academic achievement, school attendance, and discipline infractions. PSCs should document grades, attendance, and discipline prior to and after the counseling group. Although there may be no causal link between the group intervention and any improvement shown in outcome data, there may be correlational links, which serves as another data point supporting the group intervention. While it may seem overwhelming, collecting data is manageable and it helps create support for school counseling services and programs from teachers, administrators, parents, and other relevant stakeholders (Erford, 2015).

Prescreening

After receiving referrals from a needs assessment, school counselors should prescreen students to determine fitness for group counseling (Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 2009). Prescreening interviews allow a school counselor to immediately start building rapport, gather preliminary information about a student's story, explain the purpose of the group, and provide a parent/guardian permission letter detailing the

purpose and objectives of the group. For example, some students may have parents who are currently incarcerated while others may be struggling with their parents' re-entry to the family unit after incarceration (Smith & Young, 2017). The prescreening process helps determine the type and depth of the student's grief as well as appropriateness and fitness for group (Jacobs et al., 2009).

Group Sessions

Session One: Introduction

The first session is critical in establishing the tone of the group and provides a basic introduction to the purpose of the group. The pretest is administered first and then group members are provided with an opportunity to develop group rules. This allows for personal investment in the group and provides students with some autonomy. The PSC discusses confidentiality as group members are creating their rules. When covering the purpose of the group, counselors review session topics so that students are mentally and emotionally prepared for each session.

After the introduction is complete, students are provided with paper and asked to write a letter to their incarcerated parent. If students struggle with writing, the counselor can provide them with a template letter for them to complete or offer them the option to draw what they feel about their parent's incarceration. They are instructed that this letter will be sealed, kept with the counselor, and opened during the last group session. PSCs can encourage students to be as honest as possible and can reassure them that group is a safe space. The idea behind this activity is to allow students to privately share their concerns and feelings without having to divulge that information on the first day. It also

provides some qualitative baseline data to compare to how students feel at the conclusion of group.

To close this session, counselors should do a round of check-ins with each member and ask them to identify one positive thing they are looking forward to in the coming week. Additionally, they should remind students of the time, date, and topic of the next session. The counselor should also offer to meet with any students who feel they may need to process session one individually.

Session Two: Sharing Stories and Student Rights

This second session is designed to have members share their stories of their parental incarceration. PSCs may begin by reminding students of the group rules and set the tone that group sessions are safe, nonjudgmental places to share their concerns. Some students may have parents who are currently incarcerated, while others may have parents who were previously incarcerated but have significant difficulties with their parent's absence. To help with facilitating the storytelling process, the counselor may have open-ended questions prepared. To help with sharing, individual questions are placed into a bowl and the students take turns drawing questions to ask their peer. This process may help build cohesion within the group (Jacobs et al., 2009) as opposed to the counselor asking all the questions. Questions may be related to a student's story (i.e., how did you find out about your parent going to jail?, or what do you know about their incarceration?); student's feelings (i.e., how do you feel about your parent in jail?; what is your relationship with that parent like?); or student support (i.e., how did your parent going to jail impact your family?). The counselor should process the stories by linking similarities between each member's

stories. Linking shared experiences among group members may alleviate feelings of loneliness and build group cohesion (Jacobs et al., 2009).

As a second activity for this session, school counselors can review the Bill of Rights for children of incarcerated parents (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 2016). As teens become more autonomous and independent, conflict often arises with the adults in their lives (Ashraf & Najam, 2011; Graça, J., Calheiros, M., & Barata, 2013; Hare, Szvedo, Schad, & Allen, 2015), which can make them feel like they are unheard, distrusted, and not included in decision-making (Martin, Forde, Horgan, & Mages, 2018). This activity allows students to know their rights as children of incarcerated parents and to voice their concerns and feelings. For example, some of the rights include “to be heard when decisions are made about me,” “to be well cared for in my parent’s absence,” or the right to “not be judged, labeled, or blamed.” This activity encourages the students to feel autonomous and create a dialogue among group members about their rights. Counselors may facilitate discussion regarding how to appropriately advocate for their rights and where to find support.

Because sharing stories may elicit painful memories, counselors need to make sure that students are willing to return to class. Counselors should do another round of *check-ins* with students and ask them to provide one word that describes how they are feeling. Counselors should note their responses as well as their body language to ensure they can return to class.

Session Three: Family Genograms

Genograms are a clinical technique that can be used to assess a variety of relationships and patterns in families (Butler, 2008; Gibson, 2005; Goodman, 2013).

Although traditional genogram symbols can be used, it may be easier for students to work with modified symbols (Taylor, Clement, & Ledet, 2013). For example, hearts can be used to indicate a loving or close relationship with someone. In addition to a modified legend, students may be allowed a space to create their own symbols in case the ones provided do not adequately describe a significant relationship.

An important consideration when facilitating this activity is that teens with incarcerated parents often have a disrupted family structure, and they may be raised by caregivers outside of their nuclear family (Linsk et al., 2009; Ruiz & Kopak, 2014). Though some parents may have re-entered their teen's lives after incarceration, often conflict and challenges remain (Smith & Young, 2017). For Black/African American teens, extended families and cultural values may go beyond the nuclear family genogram to include significant people in their lives who may or may not be blood relatives (Ruiz & Kopak, 2014; Sarkisian, 2007). Therefore, PSCs should alter the genogram format beyond the classic genogram symbols and structure. The genogram activity provides students with a creative outlet to express their support system and even their own cultural influences and strengths (McCullough-Chavis & Waites, 2004). The people represented in the genogram and those who are not may provide valuable insights into each student's support structure. School counselors should explore not only with whom students have conflicted, strained, or absent relationships, but also point out the strength and resilience in these students and their families (Miller, 2007).

Using genograms to identify patterns and relationships in families can be another emotionally challenging activity. Being aware of one's family dynamics can be very different than having to put it down on paper and confront it visually. Not only should

counselors be cognizant of the potential for behavioral and emotional changes, but they should also make sure that students are well enough to return to class. Counselors should close the group by asking each member to identify a positive trait about themselves or their family that they learned during the session.

Session Four: Coping Skills

Development of positive coping skills is critical for students in this group. Exposure to violence, frequent family conflict, and gender differences can influence how teens internalize or externalize these issues (Liu, Mumford, & Taylor, 2018; McGee, 2015; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009). For example, avoidant coping (i.e., walking away) was found to be a protective factor for African American girls, but not for African American boys (Sanchez, Lambert, & Cooley-Strickland, 2013). Additionally, students in urban settings may find it difficult to change their circumstances, so it is important for school counselors to be aware of cultural differences when exploring coping skills (Vera et al., 2011).

In this session, school counselors work with students to create a coping skills collage. Magazines, markers, and other art supplies should be made available for students to use. As students work on their collage, the school counselor may facilitate a dialogue with the group members about the various types of coping skills that they use. This is a good opportunity to talk about the different types of coping skills and how they can be applied to different situations (McGee, 2015; Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009). Counselors may point out that the students are already successfully using coping strategies in the group process and may not realize it. Verbally sharing their stories and processing their feelings, creating artwork, and writing letters are all coping strategies

that students have been practicing since the start of the group. By the end of this session, participants should have a visual representation of their coping strategies and see a variety of coping strategies from their peers.

Although this activity may have less of an emotional impact on students, a brief closing activity or *check-out* is recommended. School counselors may ask students to identify one new coping skill they learned during the session. Additionally, counselors may challenge students to practice their new coping skills until the next session.

Session Five: Instilling Hope and Looking Forward

Because incarceration may become a generational phenomenon in families (Mears & Siennick, 2016), it is important for students to recognize their own strengths that can lead to a promising and fulfilling future. To help generate a future focus, the purpose of this session is to create a vision board. Vision boards are a useful therapeutic tool to help set personal goals related to a variety of situations and relationships (Burton & Lent, 2016). At a time when students may feel like they don't have control of much in their lives, a vision board may help students set and visualize goals.

Counselors provide poster boards, canvases, or construction paper along with various art supplies to help facilitate this creative process. Counselors ask students to discuss the differences between short-term and long-term goals. Students can then create their own goals as the counselor assists them to identify realistic timeframes for each goal. For example, counselors may provide metrics such as goals to be accomplished by the end of high school or five years after high school. These goals may include educational, personal, career, or other goals such as avocational pursuits.

In addition to identifying goals, counselors facilitate discussions that focus on concrete steps to accomplish the goals and where or when to seek help in meeting these aspirations. Counselors may incorporate topics discussed in the previous session such as relying on different coping skills when confronted with adversity when meeting goals.

For a brief closing activity, counselors may ask students to share some strategies they learned from the group about goal setting. As a follow-up, the counselors may have each student set a goal for the upcoming and share it with the group. As the session concludes, school counselors should remind students that there is only one additional group session meeting.

Session Six: Termination and Letter Opening

As the last session begins, school counselors should remind students that this is the final session for group. Because the counselor has built a trusting relationship, it is recommended that the counselor extend an invitation for the students to contact the counselor if any personal issues should arise in the future. During this session, the counselor returns the letters from the first session and the students open them. Since trust has been established, students can either share the contents of their letter verbatim or summarize its contents. The counselor facilitates a discussion among the members to see if each group member's feelings have changed over the course of the counseling group. The discussion may also emphasize what the students learned about themselves and about their peers.

After the letters are opened and discussed, the counselor may end the group on a positive note by having the students complete messages of encouragement and hope for one another. This may reinforce the vision board from the previous session and also

leave members with positive affirmations from one another. Counselors may facilitate this activity by having students make notes on notecards or create small journals in which members take turns writing affirmations in each other's journal. Lastly, the school counselor administers the posttest questionnaire. Before students are dismissed, the counselor reiterates that the group members are welcome to continue seeing the counselor individually in the future.

Practical Issues and Future Directions

Systemic and institutional barriers often prevent children and teens of incarcerated parents from receiving access to mental health supports. Thus, the role of the professional school counselor is vital to providing support. By leading the sort of group sessions presented here, the PSC's role as a key mental health provider is facilitated and serves as a preventative intervention that may help mitigate some of the many challenges that teens of incarcerated parents experience. Using data to analyze this intervention ensures quality of service and supports the PSCs role in providing direct counseling services to African American and low-income students.

One limitation with this group design is that it is not evidence-based. It was originally a grief and loss group curriculum focused on bereavement. This modified group is tailored to meet the needs of a population that also suffered significant loss due to parental incarceration. The inclusion of certain activities or exclusion of others may impact the success of this sort of counseling group. Lastly, group dynamics and leader dynamics were not considered or measured (Jacobs et al., 2009), which could ultimately determine the success of a group design.

While there is research regarding the impacts of parental incarceration, there is limited research on the support this population currently receives and how the PSC can play a role in providing support. Future directions of research may focus on how the PSC can provide services and support to children and teens of incarcerated parents. Future interventions may focus on other types of support outside of group counseling interventions. To determine the effectiveness of a counseling group, psychometric tests or surveys may be used to assess the changes in attitudes, behaviors, or levels of support. Most importantly, future studies may focus on if and how brief interventions like group counseling mitigate the challenges that children and teens of incarcerated parents experience and whether these interventions help prevent negative outcomes that affect health and well-being.

Summary

Adolescents who have incarcerated parents experience numerous challenges and adversity that other teenagers their age do not experience. Specifically, Black/African American students and those from low-income families have a higher propensity to experience parental incarceration (Wildeman, 2009). Although some counselors may encourage community referrals for children of incarcerated parents (Nichols, Loper, & Meyer, 2016), Black/African American and low-income families have limited access to community mental health support services (Creedon & Lê Cook, 2016; Kugelmass, 2016; Hines-Martin et al., 2003). Thus, school counselors may provide this assistance and support. Moreover, school counselors may provide assistance by facilitating a counseling group for students whose parents are or have been incarcerated.

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Appendix A

Sample Pretest-Posttest Questions

Rate your responses to each of the following questions using the scale below:

| | | | | |
|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

| Question | Response | | | | |
|--|----------|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I feel like no one understands how I feel about my parent being in jail. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. I have developed relationships with my peers who have dealt with the same struggles due to parental incarceration | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I have adults in my life I can talk to when I'm upset about my parent's imprisonment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I have friends in my life I can talk to when I'm upset about my parent's imprisonment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. As a teen who has a parent in jail, I know my rights. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. I know what resilience means. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I can name three positive coping strategies to help me when I'm having a difficult time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Despite my parent's incarceration, I still feel hopeful about my future. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I have a plan for my future. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Open-ended questions to be added to the posttest:

1. What I liked most about group was...
2. What I liked least about group was...
3. What I would change about group was...
4. Would you recommend this group to a friend? Why or why not?

Appendix B

Sample Teacher Evaluation

Directions: Please complete this survey at your earliest convenience. This evaluation is anonymous, so please be as honest as both positive comments and constructive feedback will only foster growth. Please return the school counseling office.

1. Do you feel that your student(s) participating in the children of incarcerated parents group justified missing class?
2. Was your student able to stay on top of class work, homework, and/or assignments while participating in group?
3. Did you see any change (either positive or negative) in your student's behavior, attitude, mood, work ethic, etc. since beginning of group?
4. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent), how would you rate the counselor's communication with you about your student? (e.g., reminders about group or communicating with any issues that you may need to be aware of.)
5. Please provide any suggestions or additional comments.