

Empowering Children of Incarcerated Parents



A tool to help us restore the
unseen victims of crime and
imprisonment



INTRODUCTION

There are many dangers facing children of incarcerated parents and it appears the issues are common worldwide regardless of the culture. This tool defines these issues, and presents the foundations necessary to help us respond effectively.

THE DANGERS

The following risks to these children have been found to exist across all cultures. In other words, if there is a prison near your town you can assume that there are also children facing:

1. The risk of being **deprived** of basic necessities
2. The risk of **depersonalization** and secondary Victimization
3. The risk of experiencing a **deterioration** in their current situation
4. The risk of experiencing a **distancing** from incarcerated parents
5. The risk of **descending** into antisocial or delinquent behaviour

Acknowledging these issues exist is essential as a first step. But how **should** we respond? How **will** we respond?

Establishing the following three foundations will set the scene for working with children of incarcerated parents:

Foundation One: What is best for a child?

Foundation Two: Understanding 'Empowerment'

Foundation Three: Ten Keys for starting ministry

FOUNDATION ONE: What is best for a child?

This may seem like a simple question, but you'll find we all have differing answers and failure to reconcile these differences could cause conflict that derails a ministry from the beginning. Some examples of questions to ask are:

1. What do we believe about children and family relationships?
2. What do we believe is the best way to train and discipline a child?
3. What form of care do we believe is best – with family, in a children's home, in prison with a parent, or...?

We encourage you to explore what you, your organisation and your culture views to be 'best' and compare that with what others think. Doing this will help you and your colleagues lay the first foundation for defining what your ministry to children will look like.

For more information, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a helpful guide.



Ten Keys for Starting Ministry with Children of Incarcerated Parents

FOUNDATION TWO:

Understanding Empowerment

The “Empowerment model” is a social work method. When we are working with people in a social environment, we are in effect doing social work. Adopting this method will enable us to work with people to help them improve their quality of life without creating a dependency on us, the worker.

In this context, we aim to work, not just with children, but with everyone involved in their life and care.

When we use this method we aim to empower people to more effectively utilize their own problem solving and coping capabilities. We help to establish links between people and the resources available within society. In doing this we support a process that helps those we are assisting to master their own situations rather than escalate helplessness.¹ There are three phases in this process:

The Dialogue Phase (Sharing): This is about building relationships, identifying resources and skills, and defining direction for their lives.

The Discovery Phase (Searching): This is about partnering with and helping the service user to do their part, discover resources they don't know they have and frame possible solutions.

The Development Phase: This focuses on accessing those resources, exploring new opportunities. In this phase celebrate successes and work out how the gains can be fully integrated into their lives.

FOUNDATION THREE:

Ten Keys for starting ministry with children of incarcerated parents

These keys are not a prescription, but are based on the successes, failures and lessons learned from the experiences of those who have gone before.

1. Pray: Immerse what you are about to do in prayer. Seek God and commit all you plan to him.
2. Know your beliefs and values regarding what is best for children. This will help to guide you in planning.
3. Identify the main needs you wish to address.
4. Build relationships: Identify the people you need to build relationships with in order to find more information, plan your project, and implement it.
5. Design a small project: This doesn't need to be complex. When you are designing the project, think about these basic questions:
 - a. *What are the needs, why are they a need? How do you know?*
 - b. *What is your solution and why did you choose it?*
 - c. *What are the main things you want to achieve?*
 - d. *What activities do you need to do to achieve them?*
 - e. *What resources and relationships do you need to find in order to do these activities?*
 - f. *What could hinder you and what could you do to prevent that happening? Be honest!*
 - g. *How will you know if you have been successful? What will you look for to tell you this?*

6. Protect the Children You Work With: Ensure children remain protected - that staff and volunteers are aligned to your beliefs about what is best (write a child protection policy).
7. Find Partners who can join you by providing the resources you need. Steps five and six will help you to present your vision to sponsors – showing you have done your groundwork will increase their respect and trust of your work.
8. Start Realistically: This can be a difficult sector to work in. Taking time to do smaller programmes will give you experience you need to understand your environment, and will demonstrate to officials and families your ability and willingness to persevere.
9. Manage your finances carefully.
10. Maintain Records: Keep good records of every thing you do (even the mistakes). Doing this will help with credibility when you expand and seek more partners. It will help you to share knowledge and improve future initiatives.

This is a highly rewarding work, and while getting involved will bring heartache at times, it will also bring great joy – don't forget to enjoy the work!



This tool was developed by the PFI: Asia Commission team including members from PF Cambodia, Hong Kong, Nepal, and India. The full version of this tool (including a sample project design) and supporting background research report is available from www.pfi.org Prison Fellowship International, PO Box 17434, Washington, DC 20041 USA. Ph: 1.703.481.000

¹(Miley, K. K., M. O'Melia, & B.L. DuBois. (1995). Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, p. 63).