

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

Children’s Book Review – Parental Incarceration

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These books were reviewed and rated (1-5 stars) for content related to parental incarceration, availability, and affordability by a group of fourteen students representing multiple disciplines (e.g., child psychology, family social sciences, sociology, public health women’s studies) under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Shlafer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota (shlaf002@umn.edu). The review process was informed by an examination of book lists created by other organizations and agencies and the use of an online retailer. With the exception of a few chapter books, each book was independently read and reviewed by two reviewers combined into one review; recommended ages and ratings were averaged across reviewers.

BOOK TITLE, AUTHOR	AGES	KEYWORDS	SUMMARY
<i>After Tupac and D Foster</i> , Jacqueline Woodson	10+	Foster care, prison, friendship, coming of age, Tupac	The unnamed narrator is an African American teenage girl who grows up with her two best friends. She struggles to make sense of the depictions of African American people in the media as well as growing up in a world filled with violence, prison, music, friendship, family, and loss. As she tries to understand her friend's experience in the foster care system, she learns more about herself. ★★★
<i>Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart</i> , Vera B. William's	7+	Jail, cops, arrests, sisters, father	Using pictures and poems, the book tells a story of two sisters who stick together through tough times while their father is in jail. The father was sent to jail for forging a check after he was fired from his job. The sisters take care of each other while their mom works hard to support her children. ★★★
<i>An Inmate's Daughter</i> , Jan Walker	11+	Stigma, family, prison	Jenna MacDonald's father was sent to prison. Her mom tried to cover up the fact that her father was in prison. Her mother didn't want it to reflect poorly on the family. When Jenna can't talk about it she journals about the fact that her father is in prison. ★★★
<i>Do Not Pass Go</i> , Kirkpatrick Hill	9+	Jail, stigma, family	This story is told from the perspective of Deet, a young, but very mature and reflective, boy who is the oldest of his two siblings. His dad goes to jail for using drugs to stay awake on the job. Throughout the book, as Deet begins to visit his father each week, his perspective changes drastically. He goes from being ashamed and embarrassed about his dad, to seeing the people who go to jail in a new light. He realizes that other kids at school have the same experience as him and that the inmates are just regular people, just like his father. ★★★★★
<i>Five-Finger Discount</i> , Barthe DeClements	8-13	Theft, father, incarceration	Jerry Johnson is in 5th grade and his father is in jail and he doesn't want anyone to know. One of his fellow classmates figures it out and threatens to tell everyone, which creates conflict between the two of them. Jerry steals pieces of wood from a construction site to build a tree house and also steals shoes to give to his mother because he can't afford to buy them. In the end when his father is released on parole, they go shopping and his dad attempts to steal shoes by using Jerry which is when he finally learns that it is not okay no matter what the circumstances. ★★★★★

<i>Harry Sue</i> , Sue Stauffacher	8-12	Incarcerated mother, felons, Wizard of Oz	The beginning of the book has a Joint Jive glossary, which provides definitions for prison slang terms used through out the book. The story is told through the eyes of eleven year old Harriet Susan Clotkin, also known as Harry Sue. Both of Harry's parents are incarcerated, so she lives with her grandmother that is abusive. Harry wants to be incarcerated with her mother as soon as she is able, and begins using prison slang. Even though she seems to be tough, Harry Sue is still a caring eleven year old. She tries to protect the children that are being mistreated by her grandmother. Harry Sue's life is much like Dorthys in the Wizard of Oz, she is trying to find her way home, but in the end she realizes she was there all along. [] [] [] [] []
<i>Jailbird Kid</i> , Shirlee Smith Matheson	8-12	Prison, bank robbery	This story is told by Angela, a 9 th grader whose dad has just returned home from prison to live with her and her mom. Jailbird Kid nicely illustrates the many struggles Angela deals with, particularly regarding the conflicted feelings she has about her father and her family. She deeply loves her father and tries to help him find work, but also knows he is making unhealthy decisions as he starts hanging with his old crew, and she doesn't want to get caught up in that. She grapples with who to talk to and when and feelings of embarrassment about how her friends and others in the town see her and her family. While her father gets mildly caught up in old habits, ultimately the story ends on an upbeat note. [] [] [] [] []
<i>Jakeman</i> , Deborah Ellis	8-12	Mother incarcerated, foster home, social workers	Jake visits Wickham prison with his older sister Shoshana. Jake has been writing to the governor for 3 years to have his mother pardoned, but he has never received a response. They must sneak out of their foster home to meet the bus for the 10 hour ride. Jake visits regularly and describes the multiple rules about visiting to his friend who is a "first timer." Jake's visit with his mom goes as usual, awkward at first and mom gets a little angry. After leaving the jail, many kids get sick on the ride home. The group stops at a hospital, but the bus driver wants to keep going - those that are healthy decide to go with him. The kids soon find that the bus driver is drunk and leave him on the side of the road. They get lost, steal food from a church, and end up at a nursing home where the governor's mother happens to be living. They kidnap the elderly woman and drive the bus to the governor's golf event. They demand their parents be pardoned, but in the chaos, Jake gets shot. [] [] [] [] []
<i>Mexican Whiteboy</i> , Matt De La Peña	13+	Racial identity, absent father, cultural barriers	Danny is half-Mexican and visiting his father's family this summer near the Mexico border. At his home in San Diego, he attends an all-white private school where his skin is too dark to fit in. Here in National City, where the population is predominantly Mexican, he stands out as too white. He struggles to find his place as a "Mexican Whiteboy" and save up to find his absent father in Mexico. Uno also stands out because of race; he is the only black kid in town. He dreams of getting out of National City, hoping to move to Oxnard to be with his father. Together, Danny and Uno use Danny's baseball talent to con local teams, as long as Danny can maintain control of his pitches. At the end of the story, Danny learns that his dad did not run off to Mexico, but instead has been in prison for the past few years. [] [] [] [] []
<i>My Daddy is in Jail</i> , Janet Bender	3-10	Jail, witnessing arrest	The book provides a discussion guide for parents and their children. A young girl returns home from school to witness her father being arrested. The book discusses her confusion along with other feelings. The young girl is also helped by a guidance counselor at school. There is a group discussion at the end, and activities that can be lead by an adult facilitator. [] [] [] [] []

<i>My Father's Son</i> , Terri Fields	16+	Homicide, paternal incarceration, coming of age	Kevin is shocked to discover his father plastered in the media as a serial killer, responsible for the brutal deaths of over a dozen women. Kevin's parents had been separated for years and had split his time between both parents. Kevin questions his father's innocence; never thinking his father could be responsible for such atrocities. Kevin and his mother struggle to survive financially and socially. The relationship with her mother is strained, as Kevin favored his father more for his laid back and relaxed demeanor towards him. The events that unfold are heart-wrenching, and will keep you at the edge of your seat. [] [] [] []
<i>My Mom Went to Jail</i> , Kathleen Hodgkins and Suzanne Bergen	3+	Foster care, jail, feelings coping	This short book is about Sarah who lives with foster parents. It mostly includes feelings, difficulties, and thoughts many children of incarcerated parents face. [] [] [] []
<i>The Night Dad Went to Jail</i> , Melissa Higgins	5-10	Witnessing arrest, jail, prison, social worker	Sketch witnesses his dad's arrest, and is confused, and angry why his dad was taken away. The police officer explains that when people break a law, they're put in jail or prison. How long depends on the type of law that they broke. Sketch has a hard time in school, and acts out aggressively towards a peer. He is taken to see a school social worker where she learns about Sketch's dad's arrest. The school social worker encourages sketch to draw pictures or speak to someone he trusts instead of fighting. Soon after, the social worker finds Sketch a support group for him and other children who have a mom or dad in prison. Sketch visited his dad in jail several times before his dad was transferred to a prison that was further away. Sketch was excited to see his dad and hug him for the first time in a while, even though visiting prison was really scary for him. Sketch would see his dad once a month, and in between visits they would exchange letters and drawings via mail. Finally, the social worker found Sketch a mentor, which was nice because Sketch had a male figure to hang out with. His dad's sentence was for six years, and Sketch confesses that although he is still a bit angry, he is working on forgiving his dad because he loves him. [] [] [] []
<i>The Not-Just Anybody Family</i> , Betsy Cromer Byars	8-12	Arrest, jail, grandfather, siblings, dogs, broken legs, police, lawyer, courtroom, judge	This story is about the Blossom Family. It starts off with the youngest sibling, junior is on the roof trying to fly when him and his siblings (Verna nd Maggie see the police coming to their farm. They run, scared leaving Junior behind. When the police came, Junior fell off the roof and broke both of his legs waking up in the hospital without knowing what happened to his siblings. The siblings come back and think the police have their brother and their grandfather. The grandfather, earlier that day was arrested for trying to defend himself from reckless teenagers downtown. With their mom gone preforming in the rodeo, Vern and Maggie walk all the way to town. Vern breaks into the jail to be with his grandfather and Maggie finds out that Junior has been in the hospital and goes to be with him and Juniors new found friend Ralph who is a pathological liar, a joker, and also at the hospital because when he was young he lost his leg. The next morning the officers at the jailhouse discover Vern in the jail cell with his grandfather and the family becomes an instant news sensation. Meanwhile the family dog, and grandfather Blossom's best friend, Mud, is missing and has been since the arrest. The Blossom mother reads about her family in the news and makes her way home. Because of the case's popularity the judge excuses the grandfather and the children are reunited with their grandfather. The mother comes home and soon Mud finds his way back to the farm house and the family is together again. [] [] [] []

<i>Sunny Holiday</i> , Coleen Paratore	3-9	Jail, Father, spirituality	Sunny is a spunky nine-year-old with a wonderful support system that consists of her mother, best friend, family friends, and neighbors. Sunny's father is in jail. Still, her father, mother, and friends instill remarkable hope in Sunny. The story follows Sunny and her adventures with her friend, living with her father in jail, and becoming involved in improving the community by infiltrating politics. The storyline is random at times but fun and hopeful! 📖📖
<i>Tyrell</i> , Coe Booth	15+	Homelessness, incarceration, prison, coming of age	Tyrell is a 15 year old boy. His father is currently doing his third stint in prison. While his dad is in prison, Tyrell has primary responsibility for keeping the rest of his family (his mother and little sister) safe. They have recently lost their home and have moved to emergency housing. At the shelter, Tyrell meets a girl named Jasmine who has lost both of her parents and is being raised by her sister, who is just a few years older than her. Tyrell has an ambivalent relationship with his father - he idolizes him, but he is also angry at him for ending up in prison again. Meanwhile, Tyrell is dating a "good girl" whose mother is everything that his own parents are not. The central theme of this book is Black masculinity, or what it means to be a man in this community where the actual adults cannot be relied upon. 📖📖
<i>Visiting Day</i> , Jacqueline Woodson and James Ransome	4-9	Paternal incarceration, contact visits, jail, father, grandmother	This well illustrated book tells the story of a little girl as she prepares to visit her father. Along with her grandmother, she takes a long bus ride to visit her father in prison once a month. She is very excited to visit and is sad that it is over so quickly, but her grandmother reminds her to count her blessings and start a new list of things to tell her dad at the next visit. 📖📖
<i>What Will Happen to Me</i> , Howard Zehr and Lorraine S. Amstutz	4+	Parental incarceration, caregivers, personal accounts, resource	The first section of this book is full of stories personally written by children with incarcerated parents. These stories are accompanied by a photo of the child. Their passages show a large variety of experiences. Some remember their parent being taken away. Some have multiple family members incarcerated. Some have good relationships with their parent while others acknowledge feelings of anger or grief. There are children of all ages (even adult children) and a range of ethnicity. The second section of this book is for caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated. There are a few personal stories plus many pages of specific advice for caregivers. This includes how to answer tough questions from children and what to do in tricky situations. 📖📖
<i>Wish You Were Here</i> , Autumn Spanne, Nora McCarthy and Laura Longhine	12+	Parental incarceration, prison, visitations	The book is divided into two sections, teens, and parents. The book is filled with personal narratives that both teens and parents share with their experience related to incarceration. The different stories the teens share cover a myriad of topics, such as, anger, forgiveness, relationship building, emotions related to visiting their incarcerated parent, and reunification. The parents share first-hand accounts on the pain, grief, guilt, shame, and regret that incarceration has produced. One particular jailed parent speaks of his experience being sexually molested as a child, and becoming a sexual molester once he had children. The book is a compilation of real stories that can bring awareness to a teen experiencing parental incarceration, as well as caretakers, foster parents, or jailed inmates. 📖📖
<i>The Year the Swallows Came Early</i> , Kathryn Fitzmaurice	8-15	Witnessing arrest, police, jail, gambling	Eleanor Robinson, known as "Groovy", is an 11 year old girl who dreams of going to cooking school someday. However, her dreams quickly seem to fall apart when her mom has her dad arrested and she learns that he gambled away her inheritance money. She goes through a roller coaster of emotions from anger towards her mother then her father, to sadness while her dad is away. Throughout her journey, she witnesses her friend's family problems as well. But, the swallows that return to the city every year teach her some life lessons and restore hope for her. Ultimately, Eleanor learns to forgive her dad, and to "expect the unexpected". 📖📖