



Attachment Behaviors in Children with Incarcerated Fathers

August 2017 podcast episode transcript

Featuring [Julie Poehlmann-Tynan](#), Dorothy A. O'Brien Professor of Human Ecology, UW–Madison

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the August 2017 episode of the Poverty Research and Policy podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

Julie Poehlmann-Tynan is a Professor of Human Ecology here at the University of Wisconsin and also runs the blog *Kids with Incarcerated Parents*. In some of her earlier research, Poehlmann-Tynan had found that although children with an incarcerated parent generally had much worse outcomes than other kids, a subset of these children seemed to be coping with it and doing ok. A key area of this variation appeared to involve the kids' attachment behaviors.

So, at the end of April this year, I was able to talk with Poehlmann-Tynan about new a study she just published in which she and her team focused on the attachment behaviors of children who have an incarcerated parent and one focus of the study was on the relationship between a child and his or her caregiver.

Poehlmann-Tynan The caregivers play an extremely important role in the children's lives. They're the person who cares for the child on a day-to-day basis. We know that they're the ones responsible for the child's well-being. They make decisions about the child, get them to daycare or school, etc. And unfortunately, not many studies focus on that role and also there are hardly any intervention programs for the caregivers even though we know from prior research that they're under a lot of stress. Usually they're challenged by a decrease in family finances when a parent is incarcerated, they also aren't as connected to social programs. Even the ones that they're eligible for, as you would think. And there's also stressors as well because, as you would think, in order to maintain contact with the incarcerated parent, oftentimes the parent needs to spend money on transportation to get to the corrections facility. Phone calls are relatively expensive and it can be really stressful to become sort of a single parent when the dad is incarcerated. So there are many stressors. Other studies have also found there's more residential mobility and the families are way more likely to be living in poverty than other families.

Chancellor The study involved a series of observations designed to help Poehlmann-Tynan and her team gain a better understanding of kids' attachment to their caregivers.

Poehlmann-Tynan One of the things that makes this study unique is that we actually went into the kids' homes and we talked to the caregivers, we observed the homes. We observed the interactions occurring between the children and the caregivers and we found that, indeed, like any other family in the United States, what's happening in the homes and with the caregivers is really highly predictive of how well the children are doing and even if, for example, the child had changed caregivers because of the parent's incarceration, even in those cases what's happening currently with the child in the home environment really matters.

Chancellor In addition, for some of the kids in the sample, Poehlmann-Tynan and her team were able to observe

Chancellor, their visits to the incarcerated parents. They used a measure called the jail-prison observation checklist, continued developed by Poehlmann-Tynan, that was developed to capture children's attachment behaviors and emotions during a visit with their incarcerated parent in a jail or prison setting. This is not something that had been done before.

Poehlmann-Tynan There's been a lot of talk regarding children with incarcerated parents. Some people say the children should visit because it's really important to build family relationships and it's also good for incarcerated parents to have family visitation. We know from other studies that it's associated with reduced negative institutional behavior and reduced recidivism and so, many advocates say children should visit. And then on the other side there are people who say children shouldn't visit because it might be traumatic for them, walking into a corrections facility, especially if they can't touch the parent or give them a hug or having to go through security procedures like metal detectors or frisking might be traumatic for children and so we have to be really careful about sort of retraumatizing them. And so, as a scientist I went to the literature and thought well, what does the research say about this, these recommendations? And what I found was really nothing, the only thing scholars have looked at in the past is frequency of visitation between children and their incarcerated parents and so I really wanted to get in there and see what was going on with the kids, how they were coping with the visits, what kind of emotions and behaviors they exhibited and so we did basically a mixed methods study to do this because there were no existing measures to be able to capture these things.

Chancellor Poehlmann-Tynan says that their observations in the jails highlighted the importance of the caregivers setting the tone for the visits with the incarcerated parent.

Poehlmann-Tynan We noticed that children engaged in what we call heightened attachment behaviors and that's when they want to stay in really close proximity to the caregiver, they want to hold their hand, they want to sit on their lap, they want to be really close and kind of get comfort from that caregiver. And we noticed that it was often caregivers who were engaging in some really positive behaviors that facilitated the child's connection with the parent during the visit. For example, they might say "show daddy what you just learned how to read? Or show daddy that song that you just learned. Or, why don't you blow daddy a kiss. Or, it's your turn to talk now. And they would do things that really facilitated the interaction in the vast majority of the cases. There were also some times where there was some inappropriate things going on where the caregiver and the incarcerated parent were having some conflict right in front of the child during the visit or where the caregiver didn't want to participate at all. But, for the most part it was supportive. The really interesting thing was that children had sort of the best visit experience, so the most positive affect and behavior and the least negative affect and behavior when the child was securely attached to the caregiver as measured in the home environment and I think that really speaks to the powerful role that the caregiver has, that they can really help children feel comfortable and assuage their anxiety, especially when they have a secure relationship with each other. And that can really facilitate the positive family connections that can happen during the visit.

Chancellor Poehlmann-Tynan and her colleagues were also able to observe whether there were behavioral differences by the type of visit. She says a recent survey of corrections facilities shows that, in most prisons, the visits occur face-to-face — what's called a contact visit. Meanwhile, in jails, which hold a much larger portion of incarcerated individuals in the United States, contact visits are rare.

Poehlmann-Tynan Face-to-face contact visits are almost unheard of. They're almost always what we call noncontact visit. And this could include a visit behind a plexiglass barrier where child and family walk in and they see the parent behind glass and they can hear the parent when they pick up a little phone, handheld old fashioned looking phone. Or it can occur through video. And the video can either be in the jail setting, so the family walks into the lobby and initiates a visit through a video monitor, or it can even be done in the child's home. Now, doing the video visits in the child's home is sort of a brand new technology and we didn't cover it in this study because they jails that we partnered with didn't have that available as yet. But what we were able to do is to compare the contact visits and the video visits with the plexiglass or barrier noncontact visitation. As I mentioned, it's the first study where we were actually able to really

Poehlmann-Tynan, continued go in and observe how children were handling these kinds of visits and so we rated kids' behaviors and their emotions from the time they walked into the corrections facility, went through security procedures, waited, and then had the actual visit. And what we ended up finding was that the children who had barrier visits, so plexiglass visits were more likely to engage in negative behaviors, so they were more likely to show distress or anger and this oftentimes was directed at their caregiver who brought them. Another interesting thing that we found — and this did not differ across type of visits, was that the most common behaviors and emotions that the children showed was happiness, and loving behavior toward the incarcerated parent and so in addition to visits being potentially stressful for children, we also know that they are really good times for children to connect with incarcerated parents and there's a lot of loving, happy interactions that take place.

Chancellor Poehlmann-Tynan says that people sometimes forget that much of the incarceration in the U.S. is at the jail level and not the prison level. This study looked at children whose fathers were in jail and Poehlmann-Tynan says one of the distinctions between jail and prison that may matter for kids with incarcerated parents is the length of stay.

Poehlmann-Tynan The majority of prison sentences, like 97 percent of them are more than a year, it's usually for felonies. And the average stay is several years. But at the jail level, what we experience in 2015 is 10.9 million admissions to jail. That's not necessarily unique individuals because what we're often seeing at the jail level is people cycling in and out of jails or churning through the criminal justice system is another way of putting it. And when you're thinking about children whose parents are incarcerated, the majority of the literature is focused on children of imprisoned parents. And, a while ago, scholars were thinking that perhaps parental incarceration in jail wasn't as significant because it was briefer and perhaps didn't have as extreme of an effect on children. But now we know, partly because of the cycling that a jail incarceration could involve multiple short incarcerations of a parent in a brief amount of time and that can have effects on child development as well so in this particular sample I focused on young children whose fathers were in jail as opposed to prison. And we did find that the majority of them had spent prior time in jail and we are currently looking at how many of them had experienced incarceration or jail just in the past year prior to that incarceration and it's quite a few, it is fitting with that cycling in and out of jail narrative and it's not so much just about the current jail incarceration, it's also about these recent ones as well that children are experiencing.

Chancellor Poehlmann-Tynan and her team also looked at other factors to try to understand what might lead to differences in attachment behaviors. One of the things they identified is whether a kid had witnessed either their parent's crime or arrest.

Poehlmann-Tynan About one fourth of children had witnessed the parent's crime and a significant number of kids were pretty distressed about it. But even more concerning, I think, is that one fifth of kids witnessed the parent's arrest and that was extremely distressing in the majority of cases and we also collected narratives from the caregivers about what was happening, how were the children exposed to that arrest and what did they witness and we found that in many cases it was actually pretty traumatic so some arrests occurred at predawn in the home and that's, I guess, a good time to find people in their beds when they're home, but sometimes it was done in very suddenly, so children were woken up in the middle of sleep, sometimes they sat on the couch where children were marched in front of them in handcuffs. Other times, the parents were arrested outside of the home. For example, they were driving and were stopped for a routine traffic stop and then the officer pulled up on the computer that maybe the parent had unpaid child support, enough to be arrested or had committed another crime or there was a warrant out for their arrest and so they proceeded to arrest the parent while asking the children to just wait on the curb. Little children, we're talking about 2 to 6 years old, unsupervised, just sitting on the curb of a busy street while the arrest was taking place. Many of the children were reported as crying, saying 'why are you taking my daddy, where are you going?' and just being very very upset about it.

Chancellor Poehlmann-Tynan says this is unfortunate because there are now protocols and procedures that have

Chancellor, been developed for safeguarding children during the arrest of a parent.

continued

Poehlmann-Tynan

And these protocols were developed by the International Chiefs of Police, police officers, so it's not some researcher like me saying this is what you should do, it's developed by the law enforcement community saying these are some ways we can protect children from some of these potentially traumatic experiences around having a parent be arrested and I would say there are probably some situations in which even if law enforcement was following the protocols and doing the best of their ability, that children can witness traumatic things. But in other cases, especially when it's a pretty low level misdemeanor or even if it's for unpaid tickets or unpaid child support, there are so many better ways of handling it that can protect children from witnessing the arrest of a parent. We did find that children who witnessed the arrest or crime of a parent and felt distressed about it or exhibited distress about it, they were more likely to have insecure attachments to their caregivers. And we don't know the causal direction of that, the study isn't experimental, we certainly can't, for many ethical reasons do that as an experimental design, but it could be that caregivers who are fostering insecure attachments with their kids are just letting the kids be exposed to more kinds of things and they have fewer boundaries. Or it could be that these traumatic experiences increase kids anxiety so much that it's hard for caregivers to assuage that and so they could end up being more insecure when we assess them in the home environment.

Chancellor

Poehlmann-Tynan says this study suggests a few key takeaways for how we think about addressing the needs of children who have an incarcerated parent, including understanding the importance of the caregiver role.

Poehlmann-Tynan

One that I think is really important is the implications for how we help families stay connected to incarcerated individuals when there are young children in the family. And it seems to me that anyone who says all children should visit or children should never visit because it's traumatic -- the truth is really somewhere in the middle. I think for the vast majority of children there were positives and stressors during these visits and so much of it relied on the role of the caregiver that that ends up being an important role. So, caregivers end up being empowered to know that they are really important in facilitating this and also, be open minded, knowing that there can be some really positive things going on in the visits and that can be really important for both children and incarcerated parents. A second takeaway has to do with really thinking about how law enforcement is interacting with children and families when a parent is being arrested and that really deserves a kind of strong look because we have these protocols in place and why aren't they being followed? There is free training online, there are webinars on .gov websites really showing that these protocols can be put in place and I think that would be really important to protect young children because a trauma like seeing a parent arrested, especially in a really shocking or aggressive manner can have lasting effects. And then, of course, I would be remiss if I didn't say that it's just tragic how many children are affected by parental incarceration and that compared to any other country in the world, we have more people incarcerated, higher rates of incarceration, and longer sentences and, really, other countries that are experimenting with alternatives to incarceration like in Denmark, they've done these policy shocks where they have alternatives to incarceration in place, we find better outcomes for children and so I also strongly encourage people, instead of doubling down on mass incarceration to really explore the idea of how to we move beyond mass incarceration.

Chancellor

Thanks to Julie Poehlmann-Tynan for sharing this work with us. To learn more, check out kidswith-incarceratedparents.com and you can also find her on Twitter. This podcast was supported as part of a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation but its contents don't necessarily represent the opinions or policies of that Office or the Institute for Research on Poverty. To catch new episodes of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast, you can subscribe on iTunes or Stitcher or your favorite podcast app. You can find all of our past episodes on the Institute for Research on Poverty website. Thanks for listening.