



Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents:

A Toolkit for Senior Corps Directors

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How to Use This Guide

This guide is to help you place volunteers in high quality programs that offer mentoring to children of incarcerated parents. Read further for how you can:

- Identify programs in your community that mentor children of incarcerated parents
- Find partners that deliver high quality services
- Coordinate roles and responsibilities with the mentoring program and station staff around volunteer screening, training, and supervision
- Assess the volunteer fit: Find the right RSVP and FGP volunteers to work with children of incarcerated parents



I. Introduction

In his State of the Union addresses for 2003 and 2004, President George W. Bush asked the nation to reach out and help the more than 1.5 million American children with a parent in prison. The Corporation for National and Community Service, through its work with faith-based and small community organizations, is responding to the President's challenge. Several programs of the Corporation—AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps*VISTA, and Senior Corps—are developing new opportunities for volunteers to mentor children of incarcerated parents. Senior Corps encourages RSVP and Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) grantees to form partnerships with organizations that serve this vulnerable population.

Mentoring has seen tremendous growth in the past two decades. While all youth can benefit from mentors, most mentoring is designed with at-risk children in mind. Seniors comprise a vital group of the caring adults who serve as mentors for these children.

What Happens to the Children of Incarcerated Parents?

Over 1.5 million children have at least one parent in prison¹. For many of these young people, the emotional trauma of having a parent in

prison results in a host of difficulties. Many children of incarcerated parents have trouble forming healthy relationships and may engage in a variety of self-destructive behaviors.

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Children of incarcerated parents are six times more likely than other youth to land in prison at some point in their own lives. One study estimates that 70% of the children of current prisoners will some day be incarcerated². Clearly the impacts of parental incarceration on children's lives cry out for strong intervention that can help children realize their promise.

How Can Senior Corps Mentors Help Children of Incarcerated Parents?

Mentoring can foster a variety of positive outcomes for youth. While mentors cannot solve all the problems of children of incarcerated parents, they can help immensely by providing:

¹ *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/iptc.pdf>

² *Senate Report 106-404: Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill, 2001*, US Senate. September 8, 2000, p. 56.

- ***A consistent adult presence.*** What children of incarcerated parents need, above all, is stable, reliable care from adults. A mentor has the ability to provide continuity when other circumstances in a child's life may be in flux.
- ***Advocacy for youth in court settings or with social services.*** Mentors can serve as impartial voices for young people, helping to represent their best interests in proceedings involving placements or the court system.
- ***Support for the relationship with the incarcerated parent, and assistance with re-entry.*** When it is determined to be an appropriate goal, mentors may engage children in activities that help nurture the parental relationship (writing letters, making cards, assisting with visits, etc.). In some programs, mentors may also assist the parent when s/he re-enters the community, helping forge connections with an array of positive supports.
- ***Exposure to community support systems.*** Mentoring is one support among many that children of incarcerated parents need. Involvement with other organizations can help surround that child with a web of care, concern, and positive experiences.
- ***An adult friend.*** The caring adults who interact most with children of incarcerated parents (social workers, case managers, foster parents, etc.) are often paid professionals. A mentor is there for the youth alone, extending friendship that builds trust and self-esteem.

In essence, a mentor can serve as an island in the storm. While this requires real commitment from both the mentor and the program, the support that lies at the heart of mentoring can greatly benefit children of incarcerated parents.



II. Identify Programs in Your Community

Seniors are often cornerstones of community organizations that serve vulnerable children and families. Senior Corps projects may be a particularly good fit for mentoring children of incarcerated parents. As a stable, mature group of volunteers, RSVP and FGP volunteers can serve as advocates, nurturers, and role models for children who need stability and consistency. Seniors often have more flexibility, time and attention available. Removed a generation from the parents and professionals involved with children of incarcerated parents, elder mentors can give the “concern without conditions” children often feel in the presence of grandparents.

Finding Local Sites that Mentor Children of Incarcerated Parents

Knowing the key players can help you connect with potential partners in this initiative. Opportunities are developing across the nation in a host of new and expanding programs.

Key Partners In the Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative

- ***U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative.*** This federal effort has established or expanded hundreds of local-level mentoring programs around the country to focus on children of incarcerated parents. Visit the website: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fbci/progs/fbci_mcp.html
- ***Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) programs.*** Widely recognized as the nation’s most established and widespread mentoring program, Big Brothers Big Sisters is also a key partner in the Amachi project, which uses faith-based volunteer settings as the vehicle for mentoring children of incarcerated parents. Visit the website: www.bbbsa.org
- ***Collaborations between Senior Corps and AmeriCorps*VISTA.*** Senior Corps is collaborating closely with AmeriCorps*VISTA to assist programs that mentor children of incarcerated parents. AmeriCorps*VISTA members build capacity and generate community volunteers to support the effort, and Senior volunteers provide a base of mentors. Download a summary of how Senior Corps grantees have responded to the President's Mentoring Initiative at: www.nationalservicerresources.org/initiatives/mentoring_children_of_prisoners/index.php
- ***Statewide and Local Mentoring Partnerships.*** These umbrella organizations currently organize and coordinate local mentoring efforts in 23 states and 15 urban communities around the country. They are a good place to find out which programs may be serving children of incarcerated parents in your community. For partnerships in your area, check: www.mentoring.org/state_partnerships/state_local_profiles.adp?

Other Potential Partners in Your Area:

- **Schools.** Though most schools do not maintain data on which children have incarcerated parents, the children themselves (or their caregivers) often alert teachers or other school staff. Foster Grandparent Programs, especially, may be in a good position to work with partner schools on referrals and other support.
- **Faith organizations and congregations.** Ask about those with a history of prison outreach and ministry. Many of these programs are expanding to mentor children of incarcerated parents.
- **Local youth mentoring agencies.** Grassroots mentoring efforts and established youth mentoring programs are receiving grants to mentor children of incarcerated parents. Check *State and Local Partnerships* in the appendix.
- **State, county, and municipal correctional systems.** These public entities help network programs that serve families with an incarcerated parent. They are a valuable source of available supports in local areas. Check the *Government* pages in your local phone book for contacts.
- **Family court and foster care systems.** Many children of incarcerated parents live in foster care or other care giving situations. Social workers and other individuals, such as Court Appointed Special Advocates, make referrals to these programs. As a result, they will often know if there is a program in your area. See *Government* pages in your local phone book for contact information.

Once you've determined who is doing what in your area, assess whether a particular program is a good fit with the goals of Senior Corps and your volunteers. The following sections will help you make informed decisions.



III. Find the Right Partner

Quality Counts

Quality is extremely important to mentoring programs. Positive outcomes for mentored youth are closely tied to the quality of the program³. Programs that properly plan, implement, and evaluate their mentoring efforts have a much greater chance of achieving their goals for youth and providing Senior volunteers with the rewarding experience they anticipate.

Recent research suggests that children who participate in failed or low quality mentoring matches (hallmarks of poorly-run programs) may wind up *worse off* in a number of emotional and developmental areas than if they had never had mentors⁴. Simply put, mentoring done poorly can actually hurt children, as they suffer the effects of yet another failed adult relationship.

The quality of the programs you place volunteers with also has risk management implications for you. Programs with gaps in screening, supervision, and support can put both youth and your volunteers at risk. Ask the right questions to help guarantee that your volunteers are placed in safe and supportive locations.

The following program principles are adapted for Senior Corps from *Foundations of Successful Youth Mentoring*, a program planning guide from the National Mentoring Center⁵.

Few mentoring programs will meet *all* criteria set forth here. But if a potential partner has many gaps or inconsistencies, the program may not be a good fit for Senior Corps volunteers.

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³ Dubois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., & Harris, C. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. [Special Issue]. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 157-197.

⁴ Rhodes, J.E. 2002. *Stand by Me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*. Harvard University Press, p. 60.

⁵ Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Mentoring Center is a partnership of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, and Public/Private Ventures.

Principle 1: Performance Measures & Program Improvement

Mentor programs that measure performance and evaluate their efforts demonstrate commitment to providing high-quality services. Measuring progress toward identified goals helps improve services over time and increases likelihood that volunteers will be satisfied, and positive outcomes will be achieved.

In the same way that Senior Corps grantees measure performance, programs that mentor children of incarcerated parents should identify goals for the mentoring relationship, positive outcomes for mentored children, and a plan for improving program services. As you meet with potential partners, ask upfront, and consider spelling out in your MOU:

- How will volunteers provide feedback on program practices?
- What positive outcomes does the program seek for youth?
- How will information on program practices and youth outcomes be shared with the Senior Corps sponsor?

For Project STAR's downloadable resource on Measuring Performance for Senior Corps Mentoring Programs, click:

www.projectstar.org/star/Library_senior/Instrument_Packets/SC_Mentoring_Packet.doc

Principle 2: Effective Program Procedures

These are the nuts and bolts of an effective program. Ask questions about the following procedures.

- **Targeted volunteer recruitment strategies**—How does the program recruit? (Review flyers or other recruitment methods). Is there a good fit between the marketing message and Senior Corps?
- **Clear access to children of prisoners**—Look for evidence of referrals from: 1) schools; 2) prison ministries, such as Angel Tree Mentoring (www.angeltree.org); 3) social workers or the foster care system; 4) incarcerated parents or caregivers; 5) youth-serving or other social service agencies that work with children of prisoners and their families.
- **Volunteer intake and screening procedures**—Mentors should submit to criminal records checks (including fingerprint checks) and personal reference checks. If mentors will transport children, valid driver's licenses, vehicle insurance, and driving records should be checked.

- **Pre-service training for all new mentors (and youth participants)**—Volunteers who mentor children of incarcerated parents need specific training around the host of challenges that children of incarcerated parents may face.
- **Matching procedures**—Matching procedures may include considerations such as mutual interests, gender, ethnicity, or geographical proximity. Ask the program what criteria they use.
- **Systems for monitoring and supporting matches**—A plan should exist for tracking match activities and providing ongoing training and support. Senior volunteers should know exactly whom to approach with communication issues or challenging situations.
- **Defined goals for youth and an approved set of mentoring activities**—Effective programs establish goals for the youth served and provide structure for mentoring activities. Consider whether the program’s goals and activities align with your RSVP and FGP volunteers’ interests and abilities.
- **Established match closure procedure**—Look for evidence that the program has strategies for bringing closure to the match in a way that recognizes the efforts of all participants and leaves them feeling positive about the experience.

Principle 3: Capacity for Service Delivery

Look for the following evidence of capacity in the agency providing the mentoring services.

- Written mission and vision
- Qualified & diverse staff with a good track record providing services to at-risk children and families
- Written policies and procedures
- Access to training and support services
- Evidence of champions, board, or parent agency support
- A good reputation in the community
- A plan for long-term sustainability

Principle 4: Effective Partnerships

Key partnerships help ensure that mentoring activities are embedded in a continuum of care, including other support services children and families need. Look for the involvement of some combination of:

- Correctional agencies and institutions
- Prison fellowships or ministries
- Communities of faith, businesses, fraternal organizations, and other sources of volunteers
- State and county departments of human services, family courts, juvenile justice, and the foster care system
- Youth-serving organizations that provide counseling support, educational or enrichment activities, or court-appointed adult advocacy
- Schools
- Other community-based organizations



IV. Refining the Partnership

The information you've just gathered should provide a sense for whether the mentor program will be a good fit for your volunteers. Next, you'll want to flesh out specifics, clarifying roles and responsibilities between you as a project sponsor and the mentor program. Articulate key roles and responsibilities in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that you formalize with the volunteer station.

In your MOU, Identify:

- Station staff responsible for day-to-day oversight of mentoring activities.
- Volunteer assignment descriptions that are clear and outcome-based.
- Volunteer eligibility requirements and screening procedures.
- Matching procedures and the role of Senior volunteers in providing input to the match.
- Roles of mentor station staff and sponsors in pre-service and in-service training.
- Monitoring procedures and communication systems between sponsor, station, and volunteers.
- How data, stories, and other information on mentoring activities will be gathered and shared.
- Station and sponsor roles in providing additional support and recognition to Senior mentors.
- Closure procedures for the matches.



V. Assessing the Volunteer Fit

Senior Corps volunteers who mentor children of incarcerated parents join a long tradition of elders reaching out to young people. Volunteers can help re-forged the bonds that grandparents, great aunts and uncles in extended families once provided.

However, formalizing relationships between two people who may not share similar backgrounds and value systems can be tricky. It takes great care—and it is not for everyone.

Effective mentors exhibit certain qualities⁶. Consider how to look for these traits as you—and the mentor program—interview prospective RSVP and FGP volunteers.

- **Time, reliability, and commitment.** It takes time to develop trust with children who may have been disappointed by adults. Can your volunteer commit to the extended time (usually one year) and effort (often weekly) the program seeks? What circumstances might cause the volunteer to leave the program early?
- **Emotional maturity and healthy self-esteem.** Mentoring is a youth-centered relationship. Seniors with a healthy “sense of self” will not be discouraged if a child doesn’t respond initially, and they are less likely to leave the program early.
- **Realistic expectations and healthy boundaries.** It often takes months to see positive effects from mentoring. Effective mentors look for small gains in children/youth (e.g. increased eye contact). Avoid placing volunteers who bring a “savior” mentality, or expect to make great changes in children.
- **Excellent oral communication skills.** Senior mentors will need to keep the conversation going. Check for a sense of humor and an understanding of how to ask open-ended questions, offer choices, maintain confidence, and appropriately share life experiences with young people.
- **Experience with, and empathy for, at-risk young people and their families.** Experience brings credibility when working with vulnerable populations. Consider questions that will give you the following information:
 - ~ Experience with at-risk youth or incarcerated people
 - ~ Volunteer or work experiences with children who are struggling
 - ~ Experience with family disruption, poverty, or other challenging situations
 - ~ Evidence of empathy for children of incarcerated parents

⁶ Henry, N. (1990). *Helping Young People Toward Success: A Handbook for Mentors*. U.S. Department of Labor, The Private Industry Council, p. 6.

- **Interest & ability to conduct mentoring activities.** Mentoring activities may vary widely—from providing homework help to visiting the zoo to playing basketball in an after-school setting. Once you have clarified expected activities with the mentoring station, share these with the prospective volunteer and discuss together whether they are a good fit.

If even one of these traits is weak in a prospective volunteer, think carefully about whether to refer him/her as a mentor. Remember that mentoring done poorly can be worse for a child than having no mentor at all. If you feel unsure, seek input from mentoring professionals. Most programs will have defined methods for interviewing and screening volunteers for suitability. Expect them to conduct additional interviews and screening of prospective mentors. Most likely, your role will be to make the initial referral.

VI. Conclusion

Mentoring as a strategy for helping at-risk children has burgeoned over the past few decades. As mobility has increased, children have lost some of the bonds that once were provided by grandparents and other elders in extended families. These losses deepen when children have a parent or parents in prison. Senior volunteers who serve as mentors can provide the mature, consistent attention that children of incarcerated parents desperately need. With proper program structure, careful recruitment and screening, and ongoing training and support, Senior Corps mentors can make a significant difference in the lives of these most vulnerable children.



Appendix: Resources and Additional Reading

Resources for Mentoring Children of Incarcerated Parents

Amachi Project—Amachi is a faith-based mentoring effort conducted in collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters and the research organization, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV). The program also found considerable support from Pew Charitable Trust and the National Crime Prevention Council in developing its model for providing congregation members as mentors to children of incarcerated parents.

Amachi is the most extensively studied and evaluated mentoring effort geared towards this population, and it has spawned a number of reports and publications including:

- Amachi In Brief, an excellent summary of the project by P/PV www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/167_publication.pdf
- *Amachi: Mentoring Children of Prisoners in Philadelphia*, a full report from P/PV on the lessons learned and effective strategies that have emerged from Amachi www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/21_publication.pdf
- *People of Faith Mentoring Children of Promise: A Model Partnership Based on Service and Community*. This excellent publication, developed by Pew's Faith and Service Technical Education Network (FASTEN) serves as a toolkit for developing mentoring services based on the Amachi model. A must read for anyone using volunteers in an Amachi-based setting. Available online at: www.fastennetwork.org/

General Resources on Children of Incarcerated Parents

Child Welfare League's Resource Center for Children of Prisoners

The Resource Center has statistics, research reports and other useful materials, including the Children of Prisoners Bill of Rights.

www.cwla.org/programs/incarcerated

Family and Corrections Network

Offers a wealth of information for families and caregivers of children of incarcerated parents. This site has extensive links and an excellent online library of articles and research.

www.fcnetwork.org/main.html

The Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

CCIP's mission is the prevention of intergenerational crime and incarceration. CCIP offers training opportunities and an extensive publications catalog.

www.e-ccip.org

Children's Services Practice Notes Newsletter

This newsletter, sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the N.C. Family and Children's Resource Program, provides guidance to youth agencies and volunteers working with children of incarcerated parents.

http://ssw.unc.edu/fcrp/Cspn/vol7_no1.htm

Legal Services for Prisoners with Children

LSPC advocates for the civil rights and empowerment of incarcerated parents, children, family members and people at risk for incarceration. Their website features several free publications.

<http://prisonerswithchildren.org>

Papers from "Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities"

These papers came out of a January 2002 national policy conference sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Several address issues related to the effects of incarceration on children and other family members.

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/prison2home02>

Information Packet: Children of Incarcerated Parents

This National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning publication provides an excellent summary of the facts surrounding children of incarcerated parents, as well as listings of programming around the country and legislation addressing the issue.

www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/children-of-incarcerated-parents.pdf

Children of Incarcerated Parents

This report, prepared by the California Research Bureau, looks at the facts around children of incarcerated parents in the state of California. It offers a nice summary of the effects of parental incarceration and serves as a snapshot of what is happening to these youth across the nation.

www.library.ca.gov/crb/00/notes/v7n2.pdf

General Mentoring Resources

Foundations of Successful Youth Mentoring: A Guidebook for Program Development

This comprehensive resource, developed by the National Mentoring Center, includes a checklist of effective program practices that can be used in assessing the quality of a potential program partner.

www.nwrel.org/mentoring/foundations.html

Elements of Effective Practice

An excellent summary of the critical elements of successful mentoring efforts.

www.mentoring.org/common/effective_mentoring_practices/pdf/effectiveprac.pdf

Generic Mentoring Program Policy and Procedure Manual

This National Mentoring Center resource can assist with clarifying roles and responsibilities with partner sites.

www.nwrel.org/mentoring/policy_manual.html

Mentoring Programs and Youth Development: A Synthesis

This January 2002 report from Child Trends examines how mentoring can help youth develop a broad array of strengths in the areas of education, health & safety, and social/emotional well-being. It examines how different types of mentoring programs impact each of these areas and the different program practices that produce desired outcomes for youth.

<http://12.109.133.224/Files/MentoringSynthesisFINAL2.6.02Jan.pdf>

Contemporary Issues in Mentoring

This Public/Private Ventures report offers a nice summary of what the research has proven about youth mentoring.

www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/37_publication.pdf

State and Local Mentoring Partnerships

These agencies are good starting points for identifying mentor programs in your area.

www.mentoring.org/state_partnerships/state_local_profiles.adp?

Performance Measurement Packet for Senior Corps Mentoring Programs.

Contains sample work plan and instruments for logging activities and measuring outcomes.

www.projectstar.org/star/Library_senior/Instrument_Packets/SC_Mentoring_Packet.doc