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Lenny Bautista

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A Silent Community

Lenny Bautista,

Faculty Advisor: Judy Dworin

Community Partners: Youth With Incarcerated Parents (YWIP), Arts Intervention Program of the Judy Dworin Performance Project (JDPP) in collaboration with Families in Crisis and Sarah Diamond of Diamond Research Consulting

Abstract

There are 1.7 million children in the United States who are growing up with parents in prison. This community of children and their challenges go unnoticed by many, and are ignored or stigmatized by others. The children are usually the victims of their parents' actions and grow up with the pain of not having a parent at a parent conference meeting; not knowing what to do with a paper that a parent has to sign; and not receiving support and guidance from their parent. The goal of my research is twofold: to uncover challenges, obstacles and difficulties that seem common to this group of children; and to determine how this information can help us work better with them, especially at a young age, and encourage them to become self advocates. I employed a qualitative approach in my research. Data was gathered through interviews, observations, notes taken at group sessions, and journal writing by the teenagers themselves.

Introduction

This research is being conducted to gain more knowledge about the experiences of children with incarcerated parents. This will allow practical application to be employed in JDPP's Bridging Boundaries: Arts Intervention with Youth with Incarcerated Parents.

Research Question

What are some of the stigmas and related problems children with incarcerated parents have to deal with while growing up, both at home and in the public sphere, such as at school, with friends, and in other social settings.

Hypothesis

Children keep hidden the fact that their parent is in prison. Therefore, this aspect of their family life and self identity remains invisible to the public. This makes it difficult to give their problems due consideration and attention in developing helpful programs and support.

Methods

One-on-One Interviews with teenagers who have been in the Bridging Boundaries: Arts Intervention with Youth with Incarcerated Parents (YWIP) for at least 2 years. This is a program provided by JDPP that believes that the arts can and do make a difference in the lives of children and adults.

Observations and notes of group sessions with teenage mentors selected from YWIP. These mentors are teenagers with incarcerated parents who have participated in the program and are chosen to work with the younger children in a similar program at The Church of The Good Shepherd.

Review and Interpretation of focused free writing completed by both of the groups (interviewees and mentors)

Sample size: 15

Findings

Five principal themes that emerged

1. **Wonders:** unanswered questions
2. **Hope:** diminished hope
3. **Replacement:** replacement by others
4. **Support:** no one to listen
5. **Trust:** lack of trust in people



Theme 1: Wonders

Question: "When asked about their parent who is in prison or now out of prison, they wondered..."

Sample Responses:

What made you make the choices you did?

How could you be so stupid?

Are you going to make the same mistake you did before later on in the future?

Why doesn't he look for me or want me in his life?

Why is he such an idiot? Why do I hate him so much?

Does he ever think back to what he did?

I wonder how he can look me in the eyes?

I wonder how does he feel when he sees me doing good?



Theme 2: Hope

Sample Responses:

It doesn't faze me now—I have days when it doesn't matter.

I hope that this is the last time.

I hope that they could get their life back together.

I hope that my Dad would come out a new person.

I hope he is trying to change.

Hope for the teenagers diminishes after being let down by their parents. Hearing that this will be the last time or getting excited to have a parent home and then having her/his taken away again causes hope to diminish. The teenagers seemed angry at first, but some admitted to not caring any more.



Theme 3: Replacement

Replaced by their fathers with a new family both while in prison and once released

Examples:

Not being able to visit your father because your father's step kids are going to visit him on the day you want to go.

Feeling like your Dad pays more attention to his new family than to his own children.

Feeling like your father loves his step children more than you and your little brother.



Theme 4: Support

Question: "What do you wish had been available to you as a child to help you process having a parent in prison?"

Sample Responses:

I wish I had someone who would sit down and talk to me about my daddy being in jail.

I wish I had someone to help me understand.

I wish I had someone to really listen to what I wrote.

I wish that I had more people for me to talk to.

I would want to have people by my side.

I wish I had people to actually listen to me and tell me it will be alright.



Theme 5: Trust

Question: What comes to your mind when you hear the word trust?

Sample Responses

Trust is being able to be yourself and tell them anything without worrying about them telling anyone else or judging you. I only trust the ones who have been here for me.

I change my phone number because I don't trust people.

Having someone you can talk to and tell that person everything without any doubt. But making sure that person won't say anything to anyone else. I definitely do not trust a lot of people.

I feel like people just want to know to be nosy, not because they actually care.



Discussion

Accomplishments: We discovered;

- Reasons why the youth may keep their identities invisible to the public
- The children would like to tell people how they feel but they just don't trust that people truly care about them. People care more about the story behind having a parent in prison, what s/he did, instead of caring how the youth feel.
- Youth appreciate having a safe zone where they can talk about their problems and also participate in art projects that help them express their feelings

Shortcomings that need to be addressed. We don't know;

- How these students are being teased.
- Why there are not more programs like Bridging Boundaries: Arts Intervention with Youth with Incarcerated Parents.
- How to get children with incarcerated parents to join the programs if they keep their lives so private.



Conclusion & Future Work

Limitations/ Difficulties in conducting the research

- Maintaining objectivity
- Teenagers' willingness to share information in formal setting

Future Direction and Work

- More programs that provide a safe space for children with incarcerated parents are needed
- More research—we know some of their concerns but we have to keep conducting research in order to find out as much as we can, which will be beneficial for the children who are freeing themselves from their worries but also for those who truly care and want to help this community
- Is there differences in the effect of having a father versus a mother in prison? How does duration impact the effect of having a mother/father in prison.