

UW-Madison: Sesame workshop materials help families affected by incarceration

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MADISON – A new study from researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison finds that families affected by parental incarceration benefited from resources that Sesame Workshop developed to support them, especially when following the materials' recommendation that the children be given honest, developmentally appropriate explanations of their parents' incarceration.

Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street, designs initiatives and content to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families, with a specific focus on the traumatic experiences young children too often face, like homelessness, foster care, or parental incarceration.

More than 5 million children – approximately 7 percent of minor children in the U.S. – have experienced the incarceration of a co-resident parent, with well-documented negative consequences. Sesame Workshop was a pioneer in creating research-based tools to help children understand what incarceration means and help families navigate its challenges together through loving, truthful conversations.

The results of the multisite randomized controlled efficacy trial are newly published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology* and reference the entire catalog of Sesame Workshop's parental incarceration materials, some of which feature a Muppet named Alex, whose father is in jail.

The study details how Alex's story and the accompanying videos, storybook, caregiver guide, and tip sheet resulted in children's at-home caregivers reporting positive change in how they talked to children about their fathers' incarceration and

children exhibiting more emotional resilience during jail visits.

“There aren’t very many interventions for children with incarcerated parents, even though millions of children in the United States experience a parent leaving to go to jail or prison,” said the study’s lead author Dr. Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, the Dorothy O’Brien Professor in Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “So for these child-friendly, high quality materials to be free and readily available online to families struggling with this experience-it’s a game-changer, especially during the coronavirus pandemic.”

For the study, the researchers randomized 71 diverse children aged 3 to 8 years with a jailed father and their caregivers into an educational outreach group and a wait list control group. They observed children during jail visits and interviewed caregivers by phone 2 and 4 weeks later. Children in the intervention group who were told honest, developmentally appropriate explanations of their father’s incarceration showed less negative affect (sadness or anger) at jail entry, greater negative affect while watching the Sesame Workshop materials, and less negative affect during the visit, showing a greater ability to “bounce back” emotionally. Children who were told distortions, nothing, or non-developmentally appropriate explanations showed more negative affect initially, and their negative affect remained relatively stable during their jail visit. Children across both groups exhibited more positive affect during the visit if they had been told the simple truth about the father’s incarceration, which is a recommendation in the educational resources.

One father using the materials shared, “I like reading the Sesame Street book to my daughter because it helps her understand where I am and that I’ll be coming home soon. It helps us talk about important stuff in a way she can understand.”

At-home caregivers who had received the educational materials also reported more positive change than the control group caregivers in how they talked with children about the incarceration over time, which in turn helps children have more positive experiences when visiting their parents in jail.

“It was great to see how well the children’s caregivers responded to the Sesame Street materials. They really followed through on the recommendations and rated the materials highly,” said Dr. Rebecca Shlafer, co-investigator on the study and assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

One caregiver reflected on how she changed what she told her children: “I didn’t want to talk about it at first but [the resources] made it more comfortable.” Another caregiver shared that she changed how she talked with her children “by letting them know it’s okay if they feel anxious or worried, and they can talk to me about it. And they do.”

“When a child endures a traumatic experience like having an incarcerated parent, the impact and sense of stigma can be overwhelming, but adults hold the power to help lessen those effects,” said Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, Senior Vice President for US Social Impact, Sesame Workshop, “Studies like these play an important role in verifying the ways research-based content can support caring adults in helping children cope with challenges, build resilience, and stay connected.”

Part of the Sesame Street in Communities program, the resources in Sesame Workshop’s Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration initiative are freely available online in English and Spanish at <http://sesamestreetincommunities.org>.