

Discussion Paper 4  
UNCOVERING THE ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM:  
Confidentiality and Children with Parents in Prison  
by Sydney Gurewitz Clemens

### Introduction

Some years ago a Head Start teacher in a Latino community told a workshop:

Last November, after she got to know me, a three-year-old girl in my class sat down next to me and said, "teacher, my daddy is in jail. But don't tell my mama—she doesn't know."

### Responding to the story

Whenever I tell this story people usually laugh... and then sink into sadness, realizing the burden of this child. And then, realizing that in their home mother and child are each "protecting" the other with silence, rather than sharing their grief, they look to each other for ways to be of help. This little girl has loyally taken on the huge task of protecting her mommy, and needs our support. Mommies are supposed to take care of children, of course, and when roles are reversed, it is very damaging to both mother and child.

### A confusing element

I have for some years been very clear that we must open discussion with children whose parents are in prison, saying "it must be hard to have your mom (or dad) in prison," honoring the child's struggle and helping him or her to be more comfortable in the classroom and in the world. When parents do not want their children told the truth, we may become confused about what we are supposed to do.

At a recent workshop with childcare supervisory personnel, I encountered some reasoned concerns about confidentiality and processing, and I want

to raise them for your consideration in this Discussion Paper.\*

How far do we take confidentiality?

Confidentiality is the responsibility not to share private information from a family without permission. Promoting and normalizing lying to children is another matter.

The argument goes: if the parent doesn't want the child to know the other parent is in prison, we must honor confidentiality.

We can, of course, say there's no room in our program for a child who is being kept from the truth, and send the family elsewhere, but that other place they go may be less good for the child than our place, and so the child can be further injured.

What to say to the parent?

What might we tell a parent who is keeping the child from knowing what's going on? We might tell them *all the children know*. We can tell the parents that children, when they find out they've been deceived, never again completely trust the parent who lied. Here's a center director with experience:

"Wow, what a heavy burden you are carrying for your family. It must be very difficult to be constantly stepping away from the truth about your child's dad. We, as a center, do not support keeping secrets, and we think it's important to help your child understand who she is and who her family is, being honest and being fair. As a school we don't want you to be ashamed of having someone in prison, but we can understand the difficulty you're facing if you talk about it with your child. How can we best support your family during this difficult time, other than by keeping the truth from them? We can help you think about *how* you might talk with your child, or *what to say*. We could even be there with you when you tell

her. We're worried that if you don't tell her yourself, she'll find out you lied, and you will lose her trust."

The director continues, "I feel there are two issues here... promoting honesty between child and parent, and no secrets... secrets hurt."

We know a lot about the damage secrets can cause. We know it from adoption, from sexual abuse, from politics. We know secrets rarely stay secret, surely not where a whole family has been upset by the arrest and trial and incarceration of a member. We cannot be complicit in keeping secrets from the children.

Children sometimes tell the teacher about the parent in jail, even though the other parent hasn't seen fit to disclose the information. We must be free to discuss this with them... to comfort them and give them our understanding of how people deal with hard things.

So, what to do with the dilemma raised above? Looking at the director's language we see her opening a dialogue with the parent, on the parent's terms for the moment, so she can begin a process of communication, a relationship, with the parent, with a goal of developing mutual trust. She will be there for the parent (who will, in all likelihood, have multiple issues she's struggling with.)

She is a director. The parents are her clients. It makes sense for her to build this relationship, while the teacher continues to work with the child, and over time we expect the parent to undo the secrecy, reflecting the more substantial support the parent, herself, is receiving.

Secrecy can only be temporary

Make it clear as you temporarily keep the secret that it isn't the course of behavior you advocate, but that you'll work with the parent to try to come to agreement. Building trust takes time.

Another director tells me:

Probably it is the beginning of a very long process with that parent and incremental decision-making usually works very well over time. We once had a parent who was in denial about her son's inability to hear, even with medical proof. It took us 18 months to FINALLY get the Mom to get him hearing aids!

### Staff responsibility to respect children's issues

Make it clear, too, that *if the child raises the issue* with a staff member, confidentiality hasn't been broken, and the staff member will have the conversation. A forthcoming Discussion Paper will consider what we should do when a child raises something with a staff member, but then worries because he's going to "get it" if the parent finds out he's told. If you have stories or ideas about this please send them to me at: [sydney@eceteacher.org](mailto:sydney@eceteacher.org)

### Foster care presents the same issues

Some children placed in foster care have a parent or even both parents in prison or jail. Foster parents have sometimes thought it a good idea to keep secret from the children just where their mom/dad is located.

This doesn't work well for the children.

Here are some of the reasons:

- The children almost always find out, and not from a kind, understanding adult prepared to answer their questions.
- Trust is eroded between the caregiver and the child.
- If the child hasn't got the true story, he or she makes up one (everyone knows kids are supposed to be living with their parents, right?) And the one the child makes up is usually worse than the truth. It often involves the child being at fault, and the parent going away to punish the child.

- Foster placement for any child means a large number of changes. Children need to process these changes, and they can't if secrets are being kept.

It is important that we put the needs of the children ahead of any need or desire to protect the adult.

Conclusion: *Making sense of the world*

For the young child whose parent is in prison, as for all children, the urge to make sense of their world is crucial. If they are not given answers to the questions that are on their minds, they make up answers. If they don't know how the world feels about them, they make up how that goes, too. In all cases of the traumatized child, (and every child with a parent in prison has experienced trauma) the fantasy they create tends to be worse than the fact. They image the prison food to be awful, they imagine the world to be ready to hate them for having such a father/mother, they imagine never having another moment's joy or pleasure.

Where we find strength in adversity

Their care givers must reassure them that in the midst of pain we find happy moments, in the midst of poverty we have hugs, in the midst of loneliness we have gifts of friendship. This will keep them fighting for their rights to have a full and worthwhile life.

My thanks to Karna Allen, Donna Cahill, and Sherry Barto for helping me think through this complexity. SGC

\*This is the fourth in a series of discussion papers on Children of Incarcerated Parents. All are available for reading and reprinting on my web site at: <http://www.eceteacher.org/CIP/index.html> The Discussion Papers are also available to members of the NAEYC on the Interest Forum for Children of Incarcerated Parents web site. To join the

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