

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

# Children's Book Review – Parental Incarceration

Rebecca J. Shlafer, Ph.D. & Alyssa Scrignoli, B.A.

*These books were reviewed and rated (1-5 stars) for content related to parental incarceration, availability, and affordability by a group of fourteen students representing multiple disciplines (e.g., child psychology, family social sciences, sociology, public health women's studies) under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Shlafer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Minnesota (shlaf002@umn.edu). The review process was informed by an examination of book lists created by other organizations, agencies, and an online retailer. With the exception of a few chapter books, each book was independently read and reviewed by two reviewers and combined into one review. Recommended ages and ratings were averaged across reviewers.*

BOOK TITLE, AUTHOR	AGES	KEYWORDS	SUMMARY
<i>After Tupac and D Foster</i> , Jacqueline Woodson	10+	Foster care, prison, friendship, coming of age, Tupac	The unnamed narrator is an African American teenage girl who grows up with her two best friends. She struggles to make sense of the depictions of African American people in the media, and growing up in a world filled with violence, prison, music, friendship, family, and loss. As she tries to understand her friend's experience in the foster care system, she learns more about herself. ★★★★★☆
<i>Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart</i> , Vera B. William's	7+	Jail, cops, arrests, sisters, father	Using pictures and poems, the book tells a story of two sisters who stick together through tough times while their father is in jail. The father was sent to jail for forging a check after he was fired from his job. The sisters take care of each other while their mom works hard to support her children. ★★★★★☆
<i>An Inmate's Daughter</i> , Jan Walker	11+	Stigma, family, prison	Jenna MacDonald's father was sent to prison. Jenna's mom tried to cover up this fact because she did not want it to reflect poorly on the family. As Jenna learns that she cannot talk about the experience of having an incarcerated father with her friends, she finds support through journaling and reflecting on her feelings about her father. ★★★★★☆
<i>Do Not Pass Go</i> , Kirkpatrick Hill	9+	Jail, stigma, family	This story is told from the perspective of Deet, a young, but very mature and reflective, boy who is the oldest of three siblings. His dad goes to jail for using drugs to stay awake on the job. Throughout the book, Deet's perspective drastically changes as he visits his father each week in jail. Deet transitions from feeling ashamed and embarrassed about his dad, to seeing the people who go to jail in a new light. He realizes that other kids at school have the same experience as him and that the inmates are people, just like his father. ★★★★★★
<i>Five-Finger Discount</i> , Barthe DeClements	8-13	Theft, father, incarceration	Jerry Johnson is in fifth grade. His father is in jail and he does not want anyone to know. One of his classmates finds out and threatens to tell everyone, which creates conflict between the two peers. Jerry steals pieces of wood from a construction site to build a tree house and also steals shoes to give to his mother because he cannot afford to buy them. When his father is released on parole, he and Jerry go shopping; his dad attempts to steal shoes by using Jerry. Jerry finally learns that stealing is not appropriate, regardless of the circumstances. ★★☆☆☆☆

<i>Harry Sue</i> , Sue Stauffacher	8-12	Incarcerated mother, felons, Wizard of Oz	This story is told through the eyes of eleven year old Harriet Susan Clotkin, also known as Harry Sue. Both of Harry's parents are incarcerated, so she lives with her grandmother who is abusive. Harry wants to be incarcerated with her mother as soon as she is able, and begins using prison slang. Even though she seems to be tough, Harry Sue is still a caring eleven year old. She tries to protect the children that are being mistreated by her grandmother. Harry Sue's life is much like Dorothy's in the Wizard of Oz; she is trying to find her way home, but in the end, she realizes she was there all along. ★★★★★
<i>Jailbird Kid</i> , Shirlee Smith Matheson	8-12	Prison, bank robbery	This story is told by Angela, a ninth grade girl whose dad has returned from prison to live at home with Angela and her mom. Jailbird Kid nicely illustrates the many struggles Angela deals with, particularly regarding the conflicted feelings she has about her father and family. She loves her father and tries to help him find work, but also knows he is making unhealthy decisions. She grapples with who to talk to and when, and her feelings of embarrassment about how her friends and others in the town see her and her family. While her father gets mildly caught up in old habits, the story ultimately ends on an upbeat note. ★★★★★
<i>Jakeman</i> , Deborah Ellis	8-12	Mother incarcerated, foster home, social workers	This story is about Jake, who visits Wickham prison with his older sister Shoshana. Jake has been writing to the governor for three years to have his mother pardoned, but he has never received a response. Together, Jake and his sister must sneak out of their foster home to meet the bus for the 10-hour ride to prison. Jake visits regularly and describes the multiple rules about visiting to his friend, a "first timer." One trip home from the prison is filled with adventure and chaos as Jake continues his quest to get his mother pardoned. ★★☆☆☆
<i>Mexican Whiteboy</i> , Matt De La Peña	13+	Racial identity, absent father, cultural barriers	Danny is half-Mexican and visiting his father's family this summer near the Mexican border. At his home in San Diego, he attends an all-white private school where he struggles to fit in because his race. At the border, where the population is predominantly Mexican, Danny stands out as "too white." He struggles to find his place as a "Mexican Whiteboy" and save money to find his absent father in Mexico. Another character, Uno, also stands out because of race; he is the only black kid in town. He dreams of getting out of the border town, hoping to move to Oxnard to be with his father. Together, Danny and Uno use Danny's baseball talent to con local teams. At the end of the story, Danny learns that his dad did not run off to Mexico, but instead has been in prison for the last several years. ★★★★★☆
<i>My Daddy is in Jail</i> , Janet Bender	3-10	Jail, witnessing arrest	A young girl returns home from school to witness her father being arrested. The book discusses the girl's confusion and her other complex feelings about her father's arrest. Ultimately, the young girl finds help from the guidance counselor at school. ★★★★★
<i>My Father's Son</i> , Terri Fields	16+	Homicide, paternal incarceration, coming of age	Kevin is shocked to discover his father plastered in the media as a serial killer, responsible for the brutal deaths of over a dozen women. Kevin's parents had been separated for years and he had split his time between both parents. Kevin questions his father's innocence, never thinking his father could be responsible for such atrocities. Kevin and his mother struggle to survive financially and socially. The events that unfold are heart-wrenching, and will keep readers anticipating what will happen next. ★★☆☆☆

<i>My Mom Went to Jail</i> , Kathleen Hodgkins and Suzanne Bergen	3+	Foster care, jail, feelings coping	Sarah is a young girl who lives with foster parents because her mother is incarcerated. In this short book, readers learn a about some of the difficulties Sarah is facing, including her thoughts and feelings about her mom being in jail. ★★★★★
<i>The Night Dad Went to Jail</i> , Melissa Higgins	5-10	Witnessing arrest, jail, prison, social worker	Sketch witnesses his dad's arrest, and is confused and angry about why his dad was taken away. After his dad's arrest, Sketch has a hard time in school and acts aggressively towards another kid at school. This book follows Sketch's story through his dad's incarceration, including how Sketch ultimately finds support at school and from a mentor and Sketch's experiences with visiting his dad in prison. ★★★★★
<i>The Not-Just Anybody Family</i> , Betsy Cromer Byars	8-12	Arrest, jail, grandfather, siblings, dogs, broken legs, police, lawyer, courtroom, judge	Junior Blossom wakes up in the hospital after falling off the roof and breaking both of his legs. He remembers being on the roof with his siblings when they spotted a police car headed toward their family farm. When the police arrived, his siblings (Maggie and Vern) ran, leaving Junior behind. They later learned that their grandfather is in jail. With their mom gone performing in the rodeo, Maggie and Vern are left to rescue Junior and their grandfather, and solve their family's problems. ★★★★★
<i>Sunny Holiday</i> , Coleen Paratore	3-9	Jail. Father, spirituality	Sunny is a spunky 9 year-old with a wonderful support system that includes her mother, best friend, family friends, and neighbors. Sunny's father is in jail. Still, her father, mother, and friends instill remarkable hope in Sunny. The story follows Sunny and her adventures with her friend, living with her father in jail, and becoming involved in improving the community by infiltrating politics. ★★★★★
<i>Tyrell</i> , Coe Booth	15+	Homelessness, incarceration, prison, coming of age	Tyrell is a 15 year-old boy. His father is currently doing his third stint in prison. While his dad is in prison, Tyrell has primary responsibility for keeping the rest of his family safe. His family has recently lost their home and moved to emergency housing. At the shelter, Tyrell meets a girl named Jasmine who has lost both of her parents and is being raised by her sister. Tyrell has an ambivalent relationship with his father - he idolizes him, but he is also angry at his father for ending up in prison again. Meanwhile, Tyrell is dating a "good girl" whose mother is everything that his parents are not. The book centers on Black masculinity and what it means to be a man in the community. ★★★★★
<i>Visiting Day</i> , Jacqueline Woodson and James Ransome	4-9	Paternal incarceration, contact visits, jail, father, grandmother	This well-illustrated book tells the story of a little girl as she prepares to visit her father. Once a month, she takes a long bus ride with her grandmother to visit her father in prison. Although she is very excited to visit, she is sad that it is over so quickly. Her grandmother reminds her to count her blessings and start a new list of things to tell her dad at the next visit. ★★★★★
<i>What Will Happen to Me</i> , Howard Zehr and Lorraine S. Amstutz	4+	Parental incarceration, caregivers, personal accounts, resource	The first section of this book includes personal stories of children with incarcerated parents. Each story illustrates different experiences children may encounter when a parent is incarcerated. Some children remember their parent being taken away. Some have good relationships with their incarcerated parent, while others acknowledge feelings of anger or grief. The second section of this book is for caregivers of children whose parents are incarcerated. There are a few personal stories, in addition to specific advice for caregivers. ★★★★★

<p><i>Wish You Were Here,</i> Autumn Spanne, Nora McCarthy and Laura Longhine</p>	<p>12+</p>	<p>Parental incarceration, prison, visitations</p>	<p>The book is divided into two sections: teens and parents. The book is filled with personal narratives that both teens and parents share regarding incarceration. The stories shared by the teens cover a myriad of topics, including anger, forgiveness, relationship building, and feelings about visiting their incarcerated parent. The parents share first-hand accounts of the pain, grief, guilt, shame, and regret that incarceration has produced. One particular parent speaks of his experience being sexually molested as a child, and becoming a sexual molester once he had children. ★★☆☆☆</p>
<p><i>The Year the Swallows Came Early,</i> Kathryn Fitzmaurice</p>	<p>8-15</p>	<p>Witnessing arrest, police, jail, gambling</p>	<p>Eleanor Robinson, known as "Groovy," is an 11 year old girl who dreams of going to cooking school. Her dreams quickly fall apart when her mom has her dad arrested and Groovy learns that her father gambled away her inheritance money. She goes through a roller coaster of emotions from anger towards her mother, and then towards her father, to sadness while her dad is away. Throughout her journey, she witnesses her friend's family problems. But, the swallows that return to the city every year teach her some life lessons and restore her hope. Ultimately, Eleanor learns to forgive her dad and to "expect the unexpected." ★★★★★</p>