

The Girl Connection

for those who serve adolescent girls
Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
August 2003

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“The mother-daughter bond is so strong, so visceral,  
it can’t really be explained just intellectually.”  
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... says Evelyn Bassoff, a Boulder, CO., psychologist who has written extensively on the subject. For a girl, “her mother is her identity. Even if that identity is one of a criminal or a drug user. The profiles of a typical adult female offender and a female juvenile delinquent are strikingly similar. Both are poorly educated, live in poverty, and make dismal choices in men. Both have been physically and sexually abused. Both have problems with drugs and alcohol, which they often use to medicate the pain of what has been done to them. History is repeating itself –only faster” (Locy, 1999).

Although little research exists that increases our depth of knowledge about mother-daughter intergenerational crime, the reality is that our experience validates its existence. Based on the assumption that girls and women place particular emphasis on the relationships in their lives, it follows that the impact of an incarcerated mother on her daughter is dramatic.

In a poll of juvenile justice agencies nationwide, 21 states responded and ten provided data on both boys and girls. “All but one reported that more girls proportionally than boys had mothers who had been previously arrested. One state, Iowa, reported that 64 percent of its female juvenile delinquents said their mothers had criminal records.’Initially, I was surprised,’ said Meda Chesney-Lind of the University of Hawaii, one of the country’s leading researchers on girls and crime. ‘There’s no data on this issue. What you have done is illustrate that the damage done to girls is arguably more traumatic than it is for their brothers in having their mother incarcerated” (Locy, 1999).

In a study that included young women, ages 14-17, who were incarcerated in Iowa and Montana, the most significant family profile issue was “mother-daughter relationship problems.” This same study reported that “although familial abuse and modeling of criminal activity is typical in the history of most delinquents,

what was most striking in profiling family dynamics of the juvenile females studied was the stormy relationship with adult females, such as mothers or teachers. Failed female-female relationships appear to be a discriminating factor in the histories of social dysfunction of female offenders. Compared to non-delinquents, delinquent girls have been shown to be more alienated from both their mothers and best friends, yet show relatively few differences in intrapersonal characteristics” (Fejes, 1995).

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“I’ve been in corrections for 18 years and I’ve seen three generations of people in facilities – grandmother, mother, daughter at the same time. I’ve seen where the mother was here, gave birth to a child, and the child is now here.”

Maryland’s Deputy Commissioner of Corrections  
Melanie C. Pereira  
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Maryland’s effort to address the problem, so effectively described by Commissioner Pereira, involved initiating an inmate mother-child visitation project, in 1992. This pilot project, *Girl Scouts Beyond Bars*, began at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women and won the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges’ “Unique and Innovative Project” award in 1993. It has since expanded to at least eight other states (Moses, 1995). If you are interested in a Girl Scouts Beyond Bars partnership, contact the National Institute of Justice, 202/514-6205.

The premise that relationships are paramount in the lives of girls leads us to the conclusion demonstrated by programs like Girl Scouts Beyond Bars: attempting to disconnect girls from their incarcerated mothers, who are often perceived as solely a negative influence, will not ensure positive progress and may in reality inhibit it.

Incarcerated

Mothers

&

Daughters



What Can Be Done?

1. Work with mothers and daughters together. Make it a priority. It is crucial to the success of young women.
2. If the pattern encompasses the previous generation *and even if it doesn't*, work with the grandmother, too!
3. Advocate for more research. There is a critical lack of pertinent research on the impact of a mother's incarceration on her daughter's potential for criminal behavior and how to address it.
4. Advocate for mothers and daughters who are incarcerated to be held as near to home as possible.
5. Look into programs like *Girl Scouts Beyond Bars* for ideas.
6. Avoid approaches that seek to separate daughters and mothers emotionally. It guarantees failure.

References

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The Girl Connection is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force, coordinated by the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, Department of Human Rights.

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