

The Invisible Victims

Children of Promise NYC Supports Young Sons and Daughters of Incarcerated Parents

by Alyson Silkowski

Every weekday after school, more than 200 children arrive at 54 MacDonough Street in Brooklyn, New York. After having a snack, the children, most between the ages of 6 and 13, disperse around the four-story building. The sound of sneakers against polished floor echoes as children run up and down the basketball court. Elsewhere in the building, children review homework and follow lesson plans in the computer lab. Others draw or compose poems. In one room, a group of children, holding enough instruments to form a string quintet, learn music note values. In a nearby room, a group of 10- and 11-year-olds sit, their desks arranged in a circle, and share their worries, anger, and frustration. They describe how it feels that their mom or dad is in prison.

This is Children of Promise, NYC, and it is no ordinary after-school program.

Serving the Underserved

Providing after-school programming and summer day camp to children of incarcerated parents, Children of Promise, NYC (CPNYC) was founded in 2007 with the goal of meeting the needs of the invisible victims of incarceration. “When a young person loses their parent, let’s say to military deployment, divorce, or death, there’s a level of sympathy and compassion that society displays,” Sharon Content, president and founder

of CPNYC, explains. “But that level of empathy does not quite exist when your parent committed a crime.” And, as Content had discovered, few supportive services exist for these children.

After spending the earlier part of her career on Wall Street, Content moved into the direct-services field, managing Boys & Girls Club of America sites in the South Bronx. Families meeting with her about their children’s behavioral issues would sometimes tell her, often in hushed voices, that the child’s parent was in prison and that the boy or girl was having a difficult time. Content did not know where to refer those families for assistance. When she was ready to develop her own nonprofit organization, she remembered those families, whom she viewed as a “really underserved, neglected population,” and decided to create a program specifically for them. Jane Silfen, director of the Parenting Center at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in Westchester County, New York, which refers children to CPNYC, says, “Children of Promise is a wonderful program that has helped support many of the children from our program who have a mother who is incarcerated. [CPNYC] provides a safe place for children to open up about what it is like to have a parent incarcerated without feeling any stigma. They also provide the children with a tremendous amount of educational and emotional support, which many do not get at home from their guardians.”

Taking a Therapeutic Approach

Today, leveraging a mix of government, foundation, and private funding, CPNYC offers after-school programming to more than 200 children and full-day summer camp to 125 boys and girls in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. The organization has nine full-time and nearly 30 part-time employees. They also partner with local agencies and other nonprofits to provide some of the daily activities. (For example, an instructor from Unity Youth Chamber Orchestra has taught music to children at CPNYC, and the Community-Word Project has worked with them on journalism and photography.) All of the children CPNYC serves are directly impacted by incarceration, and the majority have a parent in prison. While the organization provides many traditional services, including recreation, arts, and tutoring, its therapeutic approach is what sets it apart.

Co-locating with a mental health clinic, the Children of Promise, NYC Wellness Center integrates therapy into all of its activities. Children who are enrolled in the after-school program are assessed and linked to appropriate mental health services. Each child has a treatment plan tailored to his or her needs and approved by a psychiatrist on staff; the CPNYC staff use the plans as a guide to support children dealing with the challenges of having a parent in prison. In addition to the various activities that interest them—basketball, orchestra, spoken-word performances—children participate in group therapy as well as weekly or twice-weekly individual therapy sessions with clinicians trained in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. This clinical intervention, developed initially to treat children who had experienced abuse, is used to address the many symptoms of trauma.

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When they arrive at CPNYC, the children often have untreated emotional difficulties and exhibit problematic behaviors. Many are aggressive and defiant, have avoided completing tasks in school, and have gotten in trouble for acting out. In addition to coping with the trauma of losing a parent, many of the children struggle with chaotic, stressful households. Some have been ex-

posed to violence, and in more than one case, the child witnessed the parent’s arrest—or the crime itself. Many children harbor complicated, conflicting feelings. As one child said to Content, “It’s really difficult to love someone that everybody says is bad.” Content noted that at CPNYC, staff are trained to explain to children that dad (or mom) is not bad—but, rather, simply made bad choices—and that the child can feel good about loving the parent.

Impact of Incarceration

According to a 2010 report by The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2.7 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent; mothers and fathers of more than 105,000 of those children are in a New York State prison or jail. Having a parent in prison has a profound impact on a child’s psychological development. Children of incarcerated parents are often withdrawn or combative, report extended absences from school and frequent suspensions or expulsions, and are more likely than their peers to commit crimes, perpetuating a cycle of intergenerational incarceration. One analysis of the studies on this subject found that children of incarcerated parents have twice the risk of poor mental health.

In developing CPNYC’s model, Content knew that the risks faced by children of incarcerated parents were unique. She decided, “If we really wanted to break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration, and if we really wanted to deal with the issues and the challenges that our young people are dealing with in having a parent in prison, we really have to do it from the inside out. We have to deal with the shame, the stigma—for so many of the young people, the secret—of having a parent in prison.”

Acknowledging the Secret

Children of incarcerated parents are often told by well-intentioned caregivers not to discuss what happened to their parents. At CPNYC, children are encouraged to share their family histories, and for many children, it is the first setting where they are able to voice their feelings about what happened. “Our model allows them to be able to speak about it, very openly, very comfortably, not only with staff that has been trained to deal with the issues but also with other young people who share very similar experiences,” Content says. Children of incarcerated parents can relate to visiting a parent in a prison several hours away, being searched and separated from a loved one by a glass partition, and getting collect calls from prison—which are infrequent due to cost and caregivers’ inability to afford them. At CPNYC, these experiences do not make anyone different or ostracized.

Anna Morgan-Mullane, CPNYC’s director of mental health, explains, “Being able to bring the children together and provide

them with group therapy really opens up an avenue for them to relate to one another, speak comfortably about it, and not just identify but then be able to empathize with each other.” Research by Danielle Dallaire and Janice Zeman of the College of William and Mary suggests that the ability to empathize may be beneficial for children of incarcerated parents, improving their relationships with peers.

Children’s capacity to recognize and regulate their own emotions can also help them overcome the symptoms of trauma. Staff at CPNYC try to foster an environment where the children, many of whom have learned to conceal their feelings, can express themselves freely. At CPNYC, “it’s normal and comfortable to talk about whatever’s bothering you,” Content says. “Because today it might not be that my mother’s in prison. Today the issue might be that I’m pissed off because I miss my mom. And I’m eight years old, and the way that I can demonstrate that loneliness is to beat up the guy who looked at me the wrong way in school today. So it’s being able to walk in and say ‘I’m having a bad day.’ We know what it stems from. Everyone knows and understands what challenges are affecting this child’s life.”

Creating a Safe Space

Since its founding, CPNYC has served over 500 children from more than two dozen neighboring schools, but its beginnings were humble. “Initially, we thought we would just partner with schools, and they would refer our young participants,” Content says. “But when we went to the schools, we probably received about 30 children.” Many schools could not identify which children had an incarcerated parent, in large part because those children and their families did not talk about the fact that family members were in prison.

Fear of being ostracized prevents some families from seeking help, especially from traditional or more overtly clinical settings. One of CPNYC’s aims is to remove the stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent—and with accessing mental health services. Morgan-Mullane explains, “What’s unique about our model in terms of how we offer mental health is through an avenue that feels very safe and normal.” The clinical and after-school staff work side-by-side in the same building. Since the clinical interventions are weaved seamlessly into the program, the children may not even be aware of the expertise and purpose underlying all of the activities they enjoy. To them, CPNYC is just where they go to see their friends, make music, or play ball.

“We understand the services they need, and we have to develop it in a way that’s culturally acceptable for our families,” Content

says. “This is a very comfortable way—after-school programming, summer day camp—to be able to accept and receive the mental health services that are needed.”

Serving the Whole Family

While the services at CPNYC revolve around the children’s needs, staff also counsel caregivers and schedule family therapy sessions, in which caregivers learn about the implications of trauma and benefits of cultivating coping skills. Many caregivers have trouble processing their own loss; some show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, which can negatively impact their ability to care for the children. “If we really want to support the child, we have to support the caregivers,” Content affirms. Although the majority of the caregivers are single mothers, some are grandparents, extended family members, or foster parents. Most face unexpected burdens when the child’s parent is imprisoned.

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Families impacted by incarceration are likely to be poor, and the incarceration itself can exacerbate the effects of poverty. Often, the parent imprisoned had been contributing the family’s only source of income. During the incarceration, families not only experience additional financial insecurity but also residential instability. A few of the families participating in CPNYC are, or at one time were, homeless. Some are involved in the child protective services system, while others struggle to negotiate psychiatric care or other service bureaucracies. CPNYC advocates for these families wherever appropriate, connecting them to supportive services, attending court hearings, collaborating with school administrators, even helping caregivers write résumés.

CPNYC provides support not only to the children’s caregivers but also to their incarcerated parents, by helping children maintain a connection to them. Staff assist children in writing letters,

sending report cards and drawings, and providing transportation to the prisons to visit their incarcerated parents, the majority of whom are several hours away. “Parents write us continuously thanking us for not only still respecting their relationship but encouraging and supporting the bond,” Content says. When family members are released from prison, CPNYC works with the caregivers and children to facilitate the reunification process. All of these efforts are guided and facilitated by the mental health staff and designed to prevent the adverse outcomes so common among these families.

Enabling Children to Heal

Over time, CPNYC’s interventions help children understand the connection between their feelings and behaviors and equip them to more effectively manage their anxiety and aggression. One child, now ten, arrived at CPNYC “so shut down, closed off, guarded, withdrawn, and just sort of disassociated from everything because it was a way of coping that he had learned to go into to be able to protect himself cognitively,” Morgan-Mullane notes. She says it took over a year for this child to be able to talk about how the trauma in his home and surrounding the incarceration of his parent affected him.

“He came to me just the other day when he had gotten into a fight with somebody ... and he was like, ‘I’m coming to tell you that I’m angry, I’m not going to hurt this person, I’m just really upset, and I’m supposed to tell you when that happens.’ And we talked through it, he rejoined the group, and that just brought chills to the whole agency. Because this was a kid who didn’t speak when he first came. And he’s giving us full sentences on emotions that he’s having, and feelings that he’s having, and then providing himself with relaxation techniques.” For Morgan-Mullane and her colleagues, this is among the most rewarding outcomes of their work.

Evolving to Meet the Need

CPNYC is still relatively new to their facility on MacDonough Street, having moved there from a smaller site in Bedford-

Stuyvesant in March 2014. The refurbished gym, sponsored by the NBA’s Brooklyn Nets, still looks freshly buffed, and Content has yet to decide where to hang all of the children’s drawings and the more than one hundred letters she has received from their imprisoned parents. CPNYC will open a second facility in Harlem in 2015, but Content has plans to expand further, hoping to replicate their model in several other communities. Using data on arrest rates, she and her team can identify the highest concentrations of families impacted by incarceration in New York City—and in other cities and states. “It’s Children of Promise, NYC for a reason,” she says, not so subtly intimating that CPNYC can be rebranded for any neighborhood where it is needed.

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How does she evaluate the success of the organization? The progress children make on their treatment plans is certainly one way, but for her, Content says, it is seeing “the young person being able to deal with the issues of the day.” That is no simple feat, and for hundreds of children in Brooklyn, it would not be possible without her.

To learn more about Children of Promise, NYC, visit <http://www.cpnyc.org>. ■