

WHEN  
FOSTER CARE  
IS THE  
ONLY  
OPTION

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*BUILDING A BOND  
BETWEEN BABY AND  
MOTHER IS CRUCIAL  
— ESPECIALLY WHEN  
SHE'S BEHIND BARS.*

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BY JANE PORTER

Dolores Davis was serving an eight-year prison term when the improbable happened. At first she thought she might have cancer or stomach problems, anything but what she'd come to discover — that despite the tubectomy she had 10 years before, she was five months pregnant.

At the time, Davis had to make a decision. She had four children but never the chance to raise any of them. To Davis this baby was a miracle — also, her biggest challenge. Where would the child go once it was born?

In the United States, 2.7 million children have an incarcerated parent, according to the Pew Charitable Trust. While the majority of those children have incarcerated fathers, having a mother in prison tends to be more disruptive and traumatizing for a child. “Children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to be impacted than children of incarcerated fathers because they typically live with the mother,” said Mary Byrne, Stone Foundation professor in clinical health care for the underserved at Columbia University.

For newborns and infants, the challenges of separation from the primary caregiver can be particularly pronounced. In the first two years of a child's life, as critical brain development takes place, it's important for an infant to learn how to form a bond with a primary caregiver, said Leslie Leve, professor of counseling psychology and human services at the University of Oregon. “We know that the stability of care is a critical influence on their development,” said Leve.

For expectant, incarcerated mothers like Davis, options are limited. Approximately 50 percent of children with incarcerated mothers are left in the care of a relative, typically a grandparent, while another estimated 20 percent of children are cared for by their fathers, according to Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, professor and chair of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

For Davis, neither was an option. She had been estranged from her family for nearly a decade, and weeks after learning she was pregnant, she discovered her husband was killed in a fight. The only place left for her to turn was foster care.

It is common for foster care agencies not to include mothers in the initial planning process, with almost half of incarcerated mothers never hearing from their child's caseworker and two-thirds never receiving a copy of their child's case plan, according to research by social welfare expert Adela Beckerman.

Davis had missed out on raising her first four children, and she did not want the same to happen again. What's more, like many

incarcerated mothers, she had experienced foster care herself while growing up. A study of incarcerated mothers and fathers done by Partners for Our Children out of the University of Washington's School of Social Work found that more than a quarter of incarcerated mothers had been in foster care, and up to 80 percent had experienced problems with drugs and alcohol.

When the chaplain of the prison told her about the possibility of giving her child to a Christian foster family through what is today known as Jonah's Journey, Davis figured she should at least learn more.

Like many women in her position, Davis knew the difficulties of navigating the state-run system firsthand. By 16, she'd gotten mixed up in prostitution and at 18 she was introduced to crack. Now, at 31, she was in trouble again, and this time it wasn't just her life, but the life of her child she could be putting at risk.

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Jackie Gillespie and her husband, Steve, arrived at Tennessee Women's Prison one afternoon filled with apprehension. Gillespie had five biological children, but she'd hoped to adopt another child now that her youngest was older. She had never been to a prison before and didn't know what to expect.

When Davis met the couple, they sat around a large table, Davis's growing belly hidden under orange scrubs, her hands trembling. Then Gillespie took her hand. “When she grabbed my hand, I was shaking and then I felt this calm,” Davis said.

Gillespie felt it too. Under the hardness that a life of drugs and abuse had given Davis, Gillespie saw something more. “There was such a tenderness also within her,” she said. At the time, Gillespie also felt she was finally getting the chance at adopting the baby she'd been waiting for. “When I first went into this, I really had a heart for adoption,” she said.

A few weeks later, a baby girl named Marviana was born. Gillespie picked her up from the hospital when she was three days old. When Davis heard Gillespie was coming, she locked herself in the bathroom with Marviana and sobbed. She could not bear to give her child away.

Through the door, the guard threatened Davis would lose her parental visitation rights if she didn't open up. Reluctantly, the door clicked open, and she handed Marviana to her new caregiver.

For many mothers in prison, that might have been the last time seeing their child for quite some time. Given the limited visits



typically made by caseworkers and foster families, the bond between mother and baby can be nearly impossible to build and sustain. "The younger they are, the frequency of how often they see that parent is important," said Irene Clements, president of the National Foster Parent Association. "How often they can interact with that parent becomes critical."

If a mother plans to reunite with her child when released, this lack of connection presents a huge hurdle. "When children don't have contact with their parent, they are less likely to reunite," said Poehlmann-Tynan. Research has also shown mothers may be more likely to fall back into drug abuse and crime when contact with their child is not maintained. A report by the Vera Institute of Justice found criminal activity accelerated among women after their children were taken from them. This suggests that efforts to keep a mother and her child together not only preserves the family, but can lead to reduced crime rates among these women.

Yet one of the biggest challenges for incarcerated parents whose children go through the public welfare system is the lack of communication and contact from caseworkers and caregivers.

The challenges to visitation — long distances case workers or foster parents must often travel with a child to get to remote prison locations, strict unforgiving visitation rules, large caseload responsibilities that put a time strain on most caseworkers and the lack of education on the part of caseworkers when it comes to the importance of visits to incarcerated parents — all lead most foster children to have limited, if any, face-to-face contact with their incarcerated mothers.

That's why Davis was surprised when, a week after handing Marviana to Gillespie, the two arrived at the prison.

Gillespie had her reservations. "As a caregiver, you are taking that baby to the prison to be with the mama. Who does that?" she said. "I would struggle so much. How could this be right? How could this be a good thing?"

That didn't stop Gillespie from driving to the prison every week with Marviana. She would hand the baby over to her mother who would feed and rock the child. "That bonding forms the attachment cycle that is needed from birth," she said. "Later on, even in early childhood, it sets their ability to trust and to bond with mom."

For Marviana, those weekly visits meant she could begin to form a connection to her mother. When Marviana needed to have surgery for a condition called pyloric stenosis that caused her to vomit forcefully, Gillespie called Davis to make sure she consented. When Marviana was 10 months old, she took her first steps walking between Gillespie and Davis during one of their visits. "For us to get to share that together was really special," Gillespie said.

When Marviana was 22 months old and her mother was released from prison on probation, a new set of challenges arose. For Gillespie, this meant it was time to hand over the child she'd loved and raised from birth. For Davis, it meant adjusting to motherhood after having been in such a strict and regimented environment.

"Being released and being with your child full-time is a huge adjustment when you've gone from a prison setting where your life is extremely structured and regimented," said Leve. "Babies and toddlers don't follow clear patterns or sleep cycles and eating cycles. Making that transition could be particularly challenging for moms who were incarcerated."

Research shows maintaining a connection between mother, child and caregiver is important in having a successful reunification experience. For this reason, it's important for a child to stay with the same caregiver rather than being moved around from foster

family to foster family, as can be the case with foster care. "Each time you have a new foster care placement, you are that much more likely to fail in that foster care placement and need another one," said Leve. "It just adds to the youth's sense of failure and lack of confidence."


In Marviana's case, Gillespie had become her primary caregiver. Marviana clung to her, even after Davis was released from prison. Seeing her daughter's bond to Gillespie as she struggled to assert her own was hard for Davis. "I was jealous that I couldn't break that bond between her and Jackie," she said. "I couldn't handle that mentally."

To Gillespie, as with many caregivers, turning the child over to a mother who was still finding her footing after prison was scary, not to mention having to part with a child whom she'd come to think of as her own. "That little tap dance between what you'd like to do if you were the birth mom and what you get to do because you are the caregiver — that's incredibly hard," she said.

Today, Marviana is six years old. She spends weekends with the Gillespies and will stay for extended visits when her mom needs the support. "She's apart from me when she's up there, but I know she's safe," said Davis. "She has a stable life there."

A few years after Marviana was born, the Gillespies adopted a little boy from South Korea. They also took in another long-term foster child and have cared for seven babies over the years through Jonah's Journey. Marviana spends holidays with the Gillespies.

"We have become kind of like grandparents to Marviana," said Gillespie. "If you could write a success story on what Jonah's Journey was meant to be, this would be it." ✍️



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