

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

# Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 20, FALL 2011

BY AND FOR  
PARENTS IN THE  
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

## Addiction in the Family

When parents struggle with addiction, other family members can help keep children safe and keep parents and children connected. But addiction and the complications of kinship care also can strain families, sometimes to the breaking point.

In this issue, we look at how addiction impacts the entire family, especially when the child welfare system gets involved, and we explore what breaks families apart and what helps them stay connected.



ILLUSTRATION BY YC

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## “Where’s Daddy?”

*I lost my husband to drugs.*

BY QUANDA GREEN-BARNES

From the very beginning, my relationship with my husband was filled with obstacles. For a long time, I felt it was my duty to help and protect him.

I met my husband when I was 18 and visited him in prison with his brother. He had a lot of years to serve, and we lost touch. But a few years later we got back in touch and started dating.

I visited him a couple of times a month. If he saw anything wrong with me, he'd always try to make it better. I'd also write to him every day, and as soon as he received my letter, he'd write back. We wrote about our lives and our pasts.

His mother had been an addict and he was open about the time he'd spent in foster care and about his own son who he didn't get to see. I let him know that it was only because of my grandmother's love that I'd

been able to stay out of foster care. I'd had a beautiful childhood until my stepfather arrived, everything went bad, and I ran away from home. I hadn't been through everything he'd been through but in many ways we connected through our pain.

When I looked at how hard his childhood had been, I didn't judge him for being in prison. I thought, “He loves me and I love him and it'll work.”

### **A Beautiful Time**

We married about four years after we started dating. On the day of our wedding, I heard the sound of the buzzer and the prison doors open and close, but in my mind I heard the birds chirping and the wind blowing.

My husband was released a few years later and, for the first year and a half, we had a beautiful marriage. We both worked very, very hard, me as a home attendant, him as a construc-

tion worker. But we also laughed and joked around. He would wash me, feed me, do my hair, do the laundry.

My husband was also a good stepfather. My son confided things in him that he wouldn't even tell me. Neither of our fathers had been there and we agreed that we didn't want our children to feel that emptiness.

### **Too Many Burdens**

But after our first child was born, my husband started getting very depressed. I suspected drugs. He'd be pacing a lot or running out of the house. He started being a lot less friendly too. My grandmother said, “He's changing.” My friends said, “There's something wrong with him.” But I pushed it aside, hoping it wasn't true.

Then one day he said, “I'm cheating on you.” I thought it was a woman

and I slapped him hard. He said, "Please, please, I really need to talk to you," and he told me that he was using crack. Then he broke down, so instead of being angry, I just held him like a baby.

### **Guilt Mixed With Anger**

After that, part of me felt guilty. I thought it was the pressures of our family that made him turn to drugs. But I felt angry too.

I had also gone through hard times. In my early 20s, I got depressed over a man, popped some pills in a foolish moment, and child welfare snatched my son from me. Like when I was a child, life went from good to a nightmare. But I'd pulled myself together to fight for my son and I'd learned to be very strong.

I needed my husband to be strong too, so sometimes when my husband needed me, I was angry and I'd turn away.

### **God Take This Devil**

Then one night, my husband told me he had walked past a building full of lights and had wanted to go to the roof and jump off. I was eight months pregnant with our second child but I walked him to the hospital. I was so pregnant and so frustrated. I wished God could take this devil my husband was using and throw it away.

My husband was diagnosed with major depression and he stayed in the hospital for a couple of weeks. He signed himself out the day our second child was born. But then he went out on the streets and I went home alone. Soon after, he wound up back in prison.

I must have been depressed because I hardly ate and I didn't take care of myself. All I felt was numb. Still, I took the kids for weekend trailer visits because I wanted my children to have a father.

My husband acted very loving during visits and the kids were thrilled to see him. Once again, I began to believe that we could be a family. During visits I got pregnant with our third child.

But when my husband came out of

prison, he lost one job, then another, and things kept going downhill. Soon he was missing for days.

### **Missing for Days**

Every three or four days I'd leave the children with family to look for my husband. I'd take off my jewelry, put on a headscarf, and dress like a bum. I'd go into crack buildings holding a picture of my husband. I felt depressed and anxious all the time.

Our children were 3 and 4, and they would ask, "Where is Daddy? When will he be back? Will he be back?" I would look in their faces and say, "Everything is OK." I didn't want to tell them that I didn't know.

When he started using crack, part of me felt guilty. I thought it was family pressure that made him turn to drugs. But I felt angry too.

If my husband called, I would meet him. Sometimes we would sit in the park, hold hands and listen to music. Then we would go home, take care of the kids and get ready for bed. Other times he'd look dirty and act paranoid. I'd wash him up and rock him to sleep.

During those months, because I saw the love in him, I did not give up.

### **A Mean Side**

But then the love began to change. I discovered my husband was cheating on me. Soon he moved out. When he'd come around, sometimes he showed a mean side I'd never seen. One time he flew into a rage and came at the children with a belt. I jumped in the way and he hit me across my legs and feet. Another time, when my brother said not to let him in, he tried to choke my brother. After that my mother said she would call child protective services if I took my husband back and she insisted that I report him to the police.

I got an order of protection against my husband. I thought that could lead to help for our whole family. Instead it got my husband sent back to prison.

### **Loss of a Role Model**

My husband was locked up from 2007-2009 and I went forward as if my marriage were over.

Deep down I was very hurt, but it was too scary to let myself feel anything because the last time I had gotten depressed about a man, I'd lost my son to child welfare.

Those years were hardest on my oldest son, who was a teenager. He said he didn't want to talk to his stepdad or even look at him. I can't blame all my son's problems on my husband, because my son carries wounds from the time he was in foster care. But soon after my husband went back

to jail my son dropped out of school and started isolating himself. I think he felt very let down.

My other children asked for their daddy. But as time went on, they didn't ask as often.

For a year after my husband came out of prison, I got together with him

every weekend so the kids could see him, but over time he became less dependable. Now I don't even know where he lives.

### **Grief Without Closure**

Our oldest son together is only 7. He says he loves his dad no matter what. My daughter is 6. She says she can't stand her dad. She wants to know why he treats her bad. Our youngest is only 3. Sometimes he says he wants to see Dada but he doesn't really know him.

I often think it would be better if I were a widow. I wouldn't have to feel so disappointed and I wouldn't have to worry about what to say to my children. I'm afraid that if I say anything, all the anger, pain and confusion I'm holding inside will come out and make things worse for them. One time my children asked if their father was dead and I said yes. I know that was a mistake. But in a way I wanted him to be.

Sometimes I just want to forget my husband and I want my children to forget him, too. Still, I know their father's not going to disappear from their minds. I know I need to help them understand his addiction, even though I don't really understand it myself.

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# Improving the Odds

*Policies and practices that help addicted parents also help children and families.*

BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

When the Rise staff first met to discuss this issue, we talked about the loss and trauma of having addiction in the family. We also discussed how, too often, government policies and practices seem to be out of step with what both families and professionals know about the nature of addiction and recovery.

We talked with addiction professionals about the policies that wind up punishing parents for their addiction and further hurting children, and those that would help reduce the trauma that addiction causes families.

Here's what we found:

## 1) Addicts Need High-Quality Treatment, Not Punishment

Our country talks a lot about getting tough on drugs, but when it comes to providing addicts with treatment that really works, it doesn't do enough. About 95% of drug-related government spending is used for law enforcement, child welfare and health care for addicts, while only 3% of funds are used for rehab and prevention, according to Columbia University's Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse.

But high-quality programs can make a difference. Research has repeatedly shown that the most effective programs help parents improve their parenting skills, find jobs, get mental health treatment, and rebuild family ties. One study published in 2008 found that parents provided with high levels of family, education or employment services were about twice as likely to reunify with their children in foster care as those offered low levels of those services. But a 2007 report on mental health and drug treatment programs found that only 27% of programs followed the guidelines for effective treatment.

Racism and bias are part of the reason addicts are more likely to get

punishment than high-quality treatment. After all, get-tough-on-drugs policies always fall hardest on poor people and people of color. One study in Florida found that black moms were 10 times more likely to be reported for prenatal drug use than white moms, even though black moms are no more likely to use drugs while pregnant!

But harsh policies don't guarantee that kids will grow up safe and strong. In fact, a study by the University of Florida found that placing cocaine-exposed babies in foster care harms them more than allowing them to stay with their parents, especially if those parents are receiving proper treatment. In the study, babies placed in their mother's care did better on all the usual measures of infant development, like rolling over, sitting up and reaching out, than the babies in foster care.

## 2) Parents Need to Be Able to Ask for Help Without Fear

Studies have found that addicted parents often don't seek help because they are afraid of being locked up or losing their children. In part that's because it's often the subjective judgment of an individual judge or caseworker that determines whether parents lose their children. "You can have a judge who is very in favor of mother-child programs or one who is not. There are many child welfare workers who have a depth of understanding about addiction, and ones who always want to take children out of the home right away," explains Emma Ketteringham, director of legal advocacy for National Advocates for Pregnant Women.

It's also because family-treatment centers, where parents live with their children during treatment, can be expensive to run. As a result, there

are only about 100 family-treatment centers in the country.

"Too many parents are put in the position of having to choose between treatment and their children," explains Ms. Ketteringham. "Years of research suggest that legal threats do not bring about long-lasting change in a person, and the threat of losing their children drives parents away from the very services that would most benefit them and their families."



That's why, last January, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecology released a statement urging members to oppose state laws that require doctors to test pregnant women for drug use and report drug users to child welfare authorities. Instead they called for a system of early screening and education.

And earlier this year, President Obama's director of drug policy, Gil Kerlikowske, publicly recognized the damage separation can do to families. He said he hoped that treatment programs that allow families to stay together, whether in a treatment facility or through intensive services for families in their own homes, would serve as a national model.

## 3) Child Welfare Needs to Respond Differently to Relapse

The child welfare system expects addicts to get clean immediately and stay clean without relapsing but relapse is a normal part of recovery.

Parents need ongoing support when they leave treatment if they are going to break the cycle of relapse and recovery. "If you want to minimize the likelihood or the negative impact of a relapse, you have to ask whether parents are going to meetings, do they have family supports, are they receiving mental health services? They have to have something, because they just can't do it alone," says Debra Schnall, a psychotherapist who works with addicted mothers and their babies.

Child welfare officials should also understand that one relapse does not mean that a parent's recovery is doomed. "The constant threats of terminating visits because of a relapse plays into an addict's already negative self-image" and can make long-term recovery less likely, explains Ms. Schnall.

I know that from experience. When my first child was about to be taken from me, I thought, "I can't stay clean for 15 minutes. How am I going to make it for 24 hours?" When I messed up and visits were reduced or cancelled, I felt like a failure, which gave me yet another reason to get high.

Ms. Ketteringham suggests it makes more sense to ask: "How can we minimize the harm that a relapse might have on a child? For instance, can we have another adult come live with the family and be an extra source of support while the parent addresses the underlying issues? There are lots of creative ways of supporting parents in recovery while keeping children safe in their homes."

# Alive, Sober and Sorry

*I want my children to know me but my family told them that I'm dead.*

BY SYLVIA FLORES

I was 9 years old when I started getting drunk. I would sit in my friend's house in her brother's room where the walls were black and the lights were black and everything glowed in the dark. It was 1969. As she played slow music I'd drink Mad Dog 20-20 and cry because the pain I felt was overwhelming.

I cried because my first memories were of getting hit by my stepfather what seemed to be every day. Some days I would wake up in my crib to him punching my head. He was my bogeyman, my first monster.

My second started haunting me when I was only 3. He started out safe and sweet with a kiss. I remember the little yellow dress I wore that first day, and when he was done hugging on me, all I remember thinking was, "Was that bad what just happened?"

I put a stop to it when I was 9. Like *Scarlett in Gone With the Wind*, I told myself that things would be better tomorrow, and I tried to forget about the pain I was in today. But like my biological father, an addict, my brother, also an addict, and my sister, who used until she stopped, I turned to drugs to help me.

## A Functioning Addict

For many years, I drank, smoked marijuana, and used cocaine and heroin. But I also functioned. I raised my brother's daughter for 14 years. I cleaned offices. I was an aerobics instructor. I even worked as a bookie. Mainly, I boosted, stealing from one store to sell to another.

My mother told me my addiction was killing her. My sister begged me to stop. But eventually they accepted that I was going to be an addict for the rest of my life. I don't know if it

was good or bad that my family let me in even while I used, but I know they did it because they loved me.

I also married a wonderful man. Sammy was a functional addict like me. He was a mechanic and he worked all the time. It would be very late, 2-3 in the morning, and he would still be fixing someone's car. If they were stuck somewhere, we would go fix their car even if they had no money.



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DEEGAN

## No Way Out But to Fix

But in my 30s, my addiction grew worse. Every eight hours or so, I'd use five to 10 bags of heroin, and I started using crack too. Life still felt good when I had my fix. But if I didn't fix, then I'd be sick, with the shakes, paralyzed, going to the bathroom on myself, everything coming out of every hole. There didn't seem to be any way out of all that sickness except the sweet way out, to fix.

It was during that time that I became pregnant. From the very beginning, I'd fantasize, picturing the baby at 2 in a Pamper in the summer, playing outside. But the stress of wanting to stop using led me to use even more. For months I would say to myself, "You

have to stop! You have to stop!" But I never did.

## To My Daughter

Dear Samantha, I would like you to know that the day you were born was one of the happiest days of my life. You came into the world at 3:28 p.m. Despite all my guilt and remorse, I also had the nerve to be so happy. I am sorry but I was.

I was lying in the hospital bed crying, thinking to myself, "Oh my God!

What have I done? What is going to happen to you, to me, to us?" Then you showed the top of your head. And in my whole life I had never been filled with so much joy and love. The love that filled my body was so overwhelming that for a moment I knew that God was in the room with me.

Then I heard the doctor say, "Sylvia, Sylvia, look at me. This is going to be a big one. Push! Sylvia, push!" I took in a huge breath and began to push, and between each breath I kept saying, "I am sorry! I am sorry!" As I watched you fight to come out, it was the best day and the worst day of my life. Because, oh my God, they were going to take you from me.

The doctor said, "Sylvia, why are you crying? It's over. You have a beautiful baby girl. She's good. She weighs 5 pounds 12 ounces. Ten fingers. Ten toes." As she put you on my chest, you stopped crying and I stopped crying, and I said, "Oh my God, doctor. She is good. Thank you." Up to this very day, I can at any time think of that day and remember how good I felt with you the day you were born.

## Shut Out

After my daughter was born, my sis-

ter agreed to care for her, and for a year she raised her.

It put a hole not just in my heart but in my soul that my daughter wasn't with me. I started using heroin every hour and crack every 10 or 15 minutes, but even on drugs, I always felt stressed and guilty. I had days that I said yes to men when I wanted to say no. Because I felt I had to fix.

I would visit my daughter every couple of months and when I saw her I felt happy. But when my daughter was a year old, my sister died of breast cancer. Before she died, she gave my daughter to my uncle and his wife. Instead of letting me in, they told me to stay away and they told my daughter I was dead.

## Reaching Out

Once when my daughter was 3, I went to my uncle's house to see if I could see her. When the cold gray door opened, all I could say was, "Hi. How are you?"

My uncle's wife said, "Fine. What do you want?"

With a blink of my eyes that seemed to take forever, I tried to say, "I came to see Sam-" and I couldn't even finish saying "-mantha" when she opened her mouth and said, "No."

I just stood there and started to think about a thousand things. I could hear the TV in the apartment playing *Wheel of Fortune*. Then from behind my uncle's wife I heard a little voice and I realized, "Oh my God, that's Samantha, my baby."

I bent down and extended my arms and said, "Samantha, Samantha! Here! Look!" and I shimmied my hand. My uncle's wife just closed the door. But I knocked again and she agreed to let me in, maybe because she was scared I might notify the authorities. (Back then I didn't know they had

# Life After TPR

New laws give some families a second chance.

BY ANTOINETTE ROBINSON

never gotten legal custody of my daughter.)

## 'I Am Your Mother'

That day, I sat with my beautiful baby and I asked her how she was and what she liked. I held her little hand and thought, "Remember how it feels so that later you can feel her even when you are not together." I hugged her so hard and then for a quick slow second I looked right into her little brown eyes and said to her, "Samantha, I am your mother."

In that second, her eyes turned away from me and glanced at my uncle's wife. Then she closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she was staring right back at me, as if her brain had taken everything in. I wanted to reach into her soul so that the knowledge that she had a mother who loved her would stay in her forever.

But then my uncle's wife realized what I had said and she rushed me out the door.

## Looking for Help

Later, I had a son, and my uncle and his wife got custody of him too.

Dear angel, my son, my baby. How do I ever begin to tell you how sorry I am? When I try to explain why I wasn't there for you, it's hard for me to keep going. Sometimes I can't stand my own bullshit enough to tell you I love you.

When I found out you

were coming, I said, "Oh God, please let me get help." I went to a methadone program. I stayed clean from the time I was three months pregnant until five days before you were due.

The day you were born I was really out of it. When the doctor took you out of me and went to weigh you, I kept thinking how I really tried to keep you, and after you were born I went upstate to an inpatient drug rehab program. Sammy and I went to court to fight for you. But by the time of the blood test we had already relapsed. I still ask myself, "How could I have done this to you?"

## Dealing With Reality

Now my children are 10 and 14 years old. I have been drug-free for one year. In that year, I have continued to reach out to my uncle and his wife and they have continued to shut me out of my children's lives.

I don't want my children to become addicts. I want them to understand the pain that leads to addiction and that kept me addicted. I want them to be able to deal with reality. For 40 years I used because I was unable to deal with reality. I'm afraid that secrets will only hurt my kids.

I haven't been able to do much for my children so far in their lives. I hope that one day I can help them by sharing my story and my love.

*Under federal law, parents typically have only 15 months to prove that they can safely reunify with their children. For parents struggling with addiction, that's a short time to break the cycle of relapse and recovery. Yet research shows that children in foster care do better when they have parents or other biological family members in their lives. Here, LaShanda Taylor, associate professor of law at the University of the District of Columbia's David A. Clarke School of Law, describes how some states are making it easier for parents and children to stay connected despite termination of parental rights (TPR).*

## Q: What rights do parents have to visit their children after TPR?

**A:** A lot of times, children don't really understand why they are not allowed to see their parents anymore and this can be traumatizing. In some states, like New York, judges may allow continued contact when parents voluntarily relinquish their children. There also have been individual cases where judges have allowed visits after TPR, but most states do not allow it because of concerns that continuing the parent-child relationship will make children less adoptable.

If children are adopted, some states let adoptive and biological parents enter into open adoption agreements that may include visits. But in most states, it's a voluntary agreement that is not enforceable by law. If adoptive parents move away or choose to end the visits, the law favors the adoptive parents in whatever decisions they make.

One promising approach states are trying in order to avoid TPR altogether is "subsidized guardianship," which allows the court to give guardianship of the child to a relative or other individual. (This closes the child welfare case.) The guardian can receive a subsidy to care for the child up until the child turns 18, or 21, depending on the jurisdiction, but the parent retains the right to visit, to make educational decisions, even to petition to regain custody. Parents should talk to their lawyers about whether they

have subsidized guardianship programs in their states.

## Q: Can termination be overturned?

**A:** A serious problem is that of "legal orphans," children whose parents' rights have been terminated but who have not been adopted. We don't know the number of legal orphans in this country, but we know it has grown since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, because parents' rights are terminated more quickly under this law. Each year a child stays in foster care, the likelihood that he or she will be adopted decreases by 80%.

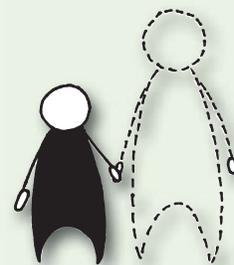


ILLUSTRATION BY TANIA ONO-KNIGHT

About a dozen states have passed statutes that allow children or their agencies (but not parents) to file for the restoration of parental rights if, after some years, the child has not been adopted. Even though parents can't file for custody, parents can keep the foster care agency updated on any progress they make. If parents don't know whether their children have been adopted, they can go to the agency or to the child's court-appointed lawyer to try to find out.

Critics feel these laws encourage children and parents to hold on to false hopes that they'll be reunited. But advocates say they allow parents who have stabilized their lives the chance to legally reunite with children. Sometimes these laws have come about because parents' organizations rallied for them. Other times, the courts said: "We'd love to give this child back to his parent but the law prohibits us from doing that." Many times, children still have an ongoing relationship with their parents, even if it's not approved by the court.

Now is a good time for advocacy organizations to push for laws to restore parental rights after TPR, because more and more states are recognizing that birth families can be a resource for children who are unlikely to be adopted. It's really not in the best interest of children to have no parent at all.

# Letting My Sister Go

*I'm afraid for my sister but I can't help her.*

BY SONIA DIAZ

My little sister Jasmin has put me through hell. My love for her will never change, but her addiction angers me and hurts me. I want to protect her but I also feel like I have to protect my children and myself.

Jasmin and I grew up together. Jasmin got everything she wanted and she never got hit. My mom hit and kicked me every day, and Jasmin's dad, my stepdad, sexually abused me.

I was depressed as a kid, and Jasmin and I really didn't have a close relationship. But when we got older, we became closer. We moved into the same building, and had our first babies at the same time. For years, my three kids always wanted to be at her home.

My little sister and I could play Scrabble for hours and we also used to go to 86<sup>th</sup> Street to watch movies together. I liked those sister nights, just us.

## Losing My Little Sister

Still, Jasmin was always more outgoing than me. I would isolate myself while Jasmin went to the beach and the pool and went out dancing. I was the one to babysit.

Then my sister made friends with a party girl in our building. She started using cocaine and her addiction changed her. Soon she was leaving her kids with me for days at a time.

My anger grew and grew. I didn't want to be angry at my sister so I blamed her friend. One night I knocked on the friend's door and called her out to fight. I wanted to hit her—badly. I think I went crazy that day. I was standing at the door screaming, "You got to come out

one day! You're going to have to take your kids to school! You're going to need something from the store!" I stood there until 3 a.m.

## Drugs and Lies

Soon after that my sister met an old man—he was 60 and she was only 23! He gave her money, took her to Puerto Rico. Then I found out he had AIDS. It gave me chills up and down my spine. Why was she doing this?

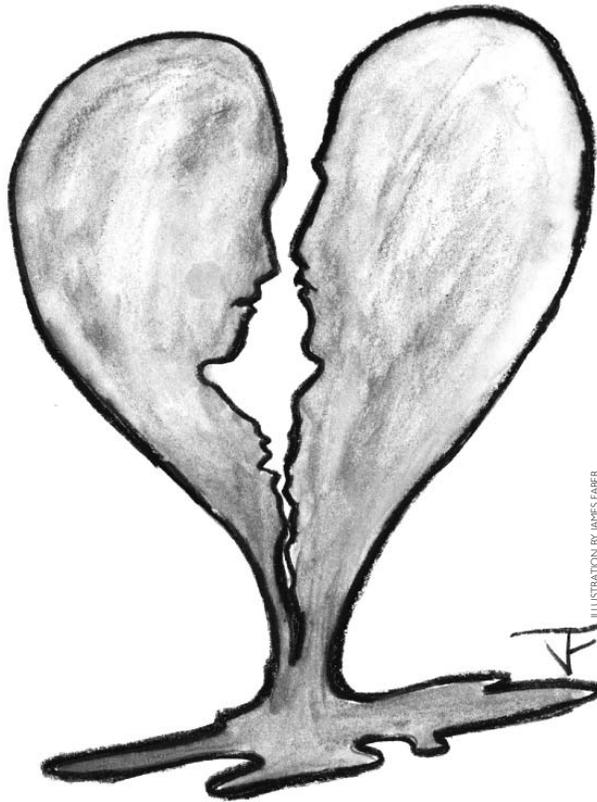


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES FABER

When I confronted my sister, she said she was using him for money but that she didn't have sex with him. I was sure it was a lie. I was so upset that I felt I couldn't handle seeing my sister this way, and for the next three years, I didn't see her.

## A Knock at the Door

Then one day I ran into my sister at my mom's house. My sister has always had the power to pull at my

heartstrings, and soon I allowed her to move in with me.

When my sister came to stay, it didn't take me long to realize that she was using but I didn't want to ask her to leave. She had two kids and she was pregnant. I'd just been through a CPS investigation (it was unfounded). I didn't want my sister to lose her kids.

But one sunny morning soon after her baby was born, CPS came knocking on my door. They told me that my sister's baby had tested positive for crack and we both needed to be tested for drugs. I was confused, scared, and embarrassed. More than anything, I was angry at my sister.

## Too Messed Up

They put my sister into outpatient treatment and into a shelter apartment. I tested positive for marijuana and I had to go to parenting classes and an outpatient drug treatment program. I was lucky that they didn't remove my children.

I hoped my sister would take the same wake up call as me, but soon after she moved to the shelter, she messed up. When CPS got to her apartment, there was no food and my 15-year-old niece had been watching her siblings for three days. The baby was just days old.

Once again I decided that I couldn't be around my sister, and for five years, I didn't see her.

## Lonely, Afraid and Sick

Over the years, I heard so many terrible things about her life. Once she went on a robbing spree, taking men for their money. One time a man took her upstate and raped her and left her in the woods. Once she wrote to me from jail asking if she could use my address. I said no.

Then I started having nightmares that my sister was dead. Even my daughter woke up one morning, hysterical, saying that she had a dream about my sister dying. I took that as a sign. I told a friend that I couldn't concentrate or sleep because I was thinking about my sister. He took me to the Bronx to look for her so I could have some peace of mind.

One Saturday we looked for hours. I was hurting inside. After a long day, we were driving toward to the highway when I saw someone who looked like my sister. I called out, "Jasmin!" There was my sister, looking half-dead, lonely, afraid and very sick. She was so skinny I could see her skull.

I got out of the car and held my sister and cried on her for what felt like an hour. I couldn't believe the sight. It was Jasmin, but it wasn't. I kept telling my sister, "I love you. You don't need to be out here."

I told my sister that I was bringing her home. She didn't seem to care. She just came with us, no questions asked. When we got to my apartment, my sister took a shower, ate and went to bed. She slept for two days straight. But when she woke up, she got up and went back out.

## The Same Story

The next time I saw my sister was at a drug program. She went there instead of getting locked up. She asked me to visit, so my daughter and I went to see her. We talked until we had to leave.

# Love, Limits and Honesty

*How families can cope with the pain of addiction.*

*Gail Murtha, director of the Expedited Permanency Program at the Children's Aid Society, met with Rise writers to talk about the emotional impact that drug addiction can have on families.*

## **Q: How are families impacted by addiction?**

**A:** Families often feel like the addiction is a reflection of them. Sometimes family members have contributed to childhood abuse that may be at the root of the addiction. This may lead them to feel both guilty and angry.

But in trying to be supportive or to compensate for their real or perceived failures, family members can have difficulty setting limits and wind up feeling taken advantage of and worn out.

Family members can show the addict love and support. They can encourage the addict to open up about past traumas. But they may also need to set limits. They may have to say, "You can't come into my house because you steal things and you upset everybody."

## **Q: How are children affected by a parent's addiction?**

**A:** Children may feel the parent values the drug more than them. Most children also want to help their parents. When they can't, they feel guilty.

If children are not with their parents, they also miss their parents. That's why it's important that kids visit their parents unless the court prohibits visits.

One of the most painful things is when parents don't show up to visits. If that's the case, family members may want to require the parent to call to confirm before arriving. They may want to tell the child about the visit only right before the parent arrives.

## **Q: How can family members talk to children about a parent's addiction?**

**A:** Children need to know that drug problems are a health issue, not a moral issue. You can say, "Addiction is an illness that changes how people act."

As kids get older, you can explain, "People often start using drugs because they feel bad and the drugs help them feel better in the short run. But in the long run, addiction changes a person's brain and makes it hard



for them to control what they do."

It's also important to tell children that they are not responsible for their parent's drug use. Children need to know: You can love your parent, you can hope for your parent, but you can't fix your parent.

**Children need to know that drug problems are a health issue, not a moral issue.**

One thing to be careful about is badmouthing parents. When family members tell children that their parent is bad, kids think they have bad seeds and that something is bad about them. You can tell relatives: "When kids hear negative things about their parents, it impacts the way they think about themselves." You can tell the kids, "Your dad's not bad, he's sick." Or, "I'm sick but I am trying to get better." If they say, "But grandma says..." you can say, "Grandma doesn't always understand the illness."

Finally, one of the most important things that anyone can do for kids is encourage them to talk. Often people become addicted because they don't have the opportunity to heal from trauma, so letting kids talk about their own feelings about their parent's addiction—or any other painful experience—can make a big difference.

—Reporting by Bevanjae Kelley, Sylvia Flores, Quanda Green-Barnes, Nicole Jones, Tracey Carter, Chrystal Reddick, Erica Harrigan and Lynne Miller

For the next three years, it seemed like my sister had truly come back to us. She completed the drug program. She spent time with her children. She found a boyfriend and a job. She began to look beautiful again, like the old Jasmin I knew.

A few months ago, Jasmin asked to stay with me. Her kids' father let her 6-year-old and 12-year-old spend weekends with us. She took them to the movies and we played Scrabble. It was just how I wanted to be with my little Sis.

## **I Cried Hard**

But two weeks ago, my sister took the money I'd been saving for Thanksgiving and she spent it getting high. After all those years sober, she turned so quickly it was crazy. I cried hard knowing that I had once again lost my sister.

At first, I didn't ask my sister to move out. It's hard to let my sister go back into that crazy world. But her drug world can jeopardize my family. What if CPS comes back? What if a drug dealer comes to my home for his money? I had to draw the line and tell myself, "I love my sister, but I also love my children and myself."

## **Letting My Sister Go**

Right now, I am so mad at my sister. Her kids love her. I love her. How can she let the devil win every time?

I also feel upset with myself for letting my sister back in. This rollercoaster makes me confused and angry. My feelings are too strong for me. I feel like I'm losing control. I keep asking myself, "Why don't I learn my lesson?"

I am afraid for my sister. I think of her every day. I don't want to lose her. I cry knowing that she's going down fast.

My mom always said, "When one of your sisters falls, you have to be there to help her up." God knows I've tried.

# No More Chances

*After my last relapse, I couldn't get my kids back.*

BY ASHLEY BREWSTER

As a child I always told myself, "I will never let my children grow up without me. I won't use drugs. My kids will never be in foster care." But everything my childhood was became their reality.

My father was a heroin addict who died from AIDS when I was 2. Before he died he passed the virus to my cocaine-addicted mother, who died when I was 8. Then my siblings and I lived with my grandma and grandpa but they couldn't get past their sorrow enough to help us get past ours.

## Rock-a-bye Baby and ABCs

I met Marcus when I was 14 and he was 23. He used to beat me up, often every day. Substance abuse was a big part of our relationship.

We had five kids together. I showed

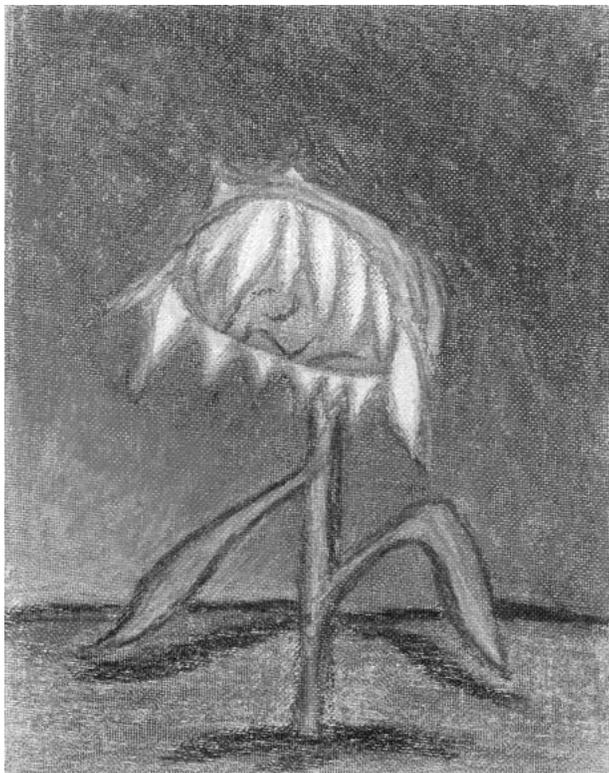


ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DEEGAN

my kids love, because that is what I yearned for my whole life. We'd go to the library and read Dr. Seuss. We'd play and I'd sing nursery rhymes, like Rock-a-bye Baby and ABCs. Although my love turned out

I got locked up but I filed a petition for a reduced sentence. I wrote to the judge. I contacted a drug treatment program I could enter the

not to be enough, I really did love being a mother. My children were my life, my best friends, and sometimes my parent.

But my kids also walked around cussing, doing whatever they wanted, and watching their father beat me. The child welfare system was also in and out of our lives, and I lost my children twice before I finally lost them for the last time.

## Holding On to Hope

When my kids were taken for the last time, the next nine months were a roller coaster ride of hope and despair.

moment I was released. During treatment, I worked diligently to get my life in order. I finished my case plan: parenting, substance abuse treatment, a domestic violence program.

The time my children and I spent together was short, and long in between. When we were together, we read and laughed. We shared hugs and kisses. I would hold each of them telling them how much I loved them.

But the story in court kept changing. First they said, "We will give your kids back." Then they said, "We will give you the girls." Then they said, "We won't give you any of the kids." Even when I had succeeded in finding employment and housing, they still didn't return my children to me.

On October 7, 2008, my ability to believe failed me. I began to think that I was being selfish, wanting to get my children back after losing them twice. I thought the same thoughts child welfare must have been thinking: Can she really do this?

That day, I left my kids behind in

# My Sister Accepted Me But Not My Addiction

BY TRACEY CARTER

My father was a truck driver and my mother was a teacher and they raised all 13 of us with good values. But when I was 10, my mother died of cancer and my father died of a broken heart.

In my 20s, what I wanted for my own children was what my parents had for us—a stable home and a mother and father. I already had three kids and I was pregnant again when I started going through problems with their father. When my fantasy fell apart, I felt a lot of pain.

I started hanging out on weekends using crack, not realizing that I would take to it so quickly. It made me numb and soon I was hanging out Friday to Friday.

My sister took in all my children. One day she stopped me at the front door and told me, "You haven't seen your kids in two months. They deserve better. I love you but these are your children and they need a mother."

My sister knew my kids needed to

see me so she told me that if I came by, she would bring the kids to the door and let me see them outside. The hardest was with my oldest son. He was always mommy's boy, and he would always cry whenever I left.

Still, my sister also set a clear limit with me. She would not allow me to cross the threshold into her house. I think she wanted me to know that she loved me and my children loved me but that she would not allow my addiction to take over their lives.

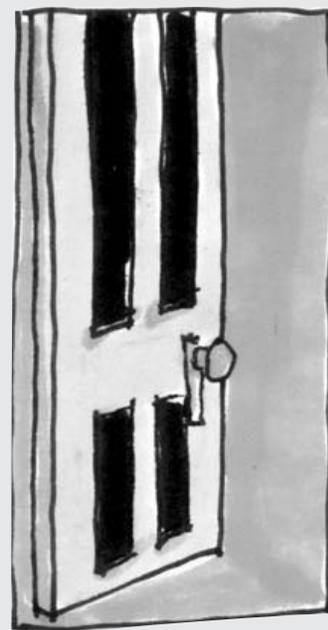


ILLUSTRATION BY YC

# All in the Family

*Kinship care is worth the complications.*

Florida and came to New York. I just wanted to escape, and for the next nine months, I lived only for the next high. I didn't care if I died that way, because I felt I had nothing to live for. My younger sister got custody of my four youngest children and my rights were terminated.

## Relapse and Regrets

In 2009, I got clean. When I started in recovery, I had

tell myself that at least my children are with family. My sister and I have agreed that I won't see the kids until they get older, though I talk to them every once in a while. The saddest part is that I have no communication with my oldest son, who lives with his paternal grandma.

Now I have an 8-month-old daughter and I am doing my best to be a good mother.

I began to think that I was being selfish, wanting to get my children back after losing them twice.

nothing to cover up the pain that was as deep as the ocean. The feeling of letting go of something I loved so much—my children—was like tearing my heart out of my chest.

The best I can do now is

## My Family Judges Me For My Son's Addiction

BY ANONYMOUS

My son suffers from mental illness and addiction. My son had problems when he was a child, but I did everything I could for him and he did well. He went to college on a scholarship. Then he came home one vacation. It was the height of the crack epidemic, and he got addicted.

My mother is absolutely in

Still, every day is painful. When my older children do want to be in my life, I hope I can give them the honesty and love that I didn't have as a child, and be the mother that before I couldn't be.

love with my son and she's been supportive of me. But the rest of my family judges me. They say, "You're the smart one but you've got the crazy kid." When my daughter had problems and I took in my granddaughters, my family said: "How can you raise them? Look at your son."

Naomi Weinstein, director of the Center on Addiction and the Family at Phoenix House, explains the benefits and complications of kinship care for families dealing with addiction:

If children have to be removed from home, kinship care offers some significant benefits. Children in kinship care usually live with people they are familiar with rather than with strangers. They also go through fewer placement changes and have more contact with their parents and siblings.

Kinship care can also provide a sense of comfort and continuity. The kinship caregiver may have a picture of Mom on the mantelpiece, and that lets the kids know that Mom is loved. For the holidays, Mom may not be there, but Uncle Johnny is, and the children know Uncle Johnny loves them. Or maybe Grandma's raising the children and she herself is in recovery. That can give a child hope and inspiration.

Another huge benefit of kinship care is that, under the Adoption and Safe Families Act, kinship care is considered a form of "permanency." If children are in foster homes or group homes, agencies have to file to terminate parents' rights after children have been in care 15 out of 22 months. But if children are in kinship homes, agencies don't have to file. This is important because the pace of recovery from addiction is slow. Many people relapse, and recovery usually takes longer than 15 months. Parents need time to reunify.

## Devastating Anger

The flip side is that kinship care can come with a lot of complicated and difficult emotions. Sometimes kinship caregivers are themselves in recovery and may have contributed to childhood traumas that led to a parent's addiction. This can lead them to feel very guilty.

Caregivers can also feel very angry. If the



caregiver is Grandma, she may have other children who are resentful of how much time she is devoting to the addict's children and not their own. Or she may say to herself, "These little 2- and 4-year-old girls remind me of their mother, and she turned out no good." That kind

of anger can have a devastating impact on children.

The addicted parent can feel scared and angry, too. Maybe mom was abused as a child and feels scared that what happened to her will happen to her own children while they are living with family. She can feel guilty, too, if she knows that her children are running the caregiver ragged.

The possibility of reunification can also bring up a lot of complicated feelings. Even kin may not want to give children back to their parents, thinking, "I like raising these kids. I don't want to give them up." Or the caregiver may not trust the parent is really ready to parent again. Those doubts can play into the parent's own self-doubts. If there's a battle, children can feel caught in the middle.

## Families Need Help and Support

For all these reasons, family therapy is often a crucial part of successful kinship care. A good family therapist can help to illuminate a child's concerns. She can loosen up assumptions a caregiver might have about a parent. She can talk to everyone about their fears and feelings about reunification. Unfortunately, there's a serious lack of good mental health services in general, and good family therapy can be tough to find.

But it's important for family members to find someone to talk to, whether it's a sensitive caseworker, their own therapist, or a support group. Because when it comes to kinship care, there are a lot of emotions to work through and a lot of relationships to figure out.

# No More Keeping Secrets

*I'm facing the crime I committed against my children.*

BY ANONYMOUS

A fellow inmate and I are thinking about starting a support group at Bedford Hills Correctional Center for women with convictions related to mistreating children. I have a child-related conviction. I was a crack addict. Even though I was prostituting myself, I couldn't quench my thirst for the drug. Ultimately I prostituted my children. I feel so ashamed, guilty and disgusted with myself. I cry at night when I think about what I did.

I remember the first time I allowed my daughter to do this disgusting thing to get me high. I was in the living room of this guy's apartment and my child was in the room with him. All I did was cry. I felt trapped. I knew what I was allowing her to do was wrong. My addiction took me places that I thought I would never go.

That day, after I took my daughter home, I was kind of hoping that she would tell someone because I couldn't stop this madness on my own. But for two years I prostituted her and she kept it a secret. She once said that she hated to see me withdrawing. She did what she did so I wouldn't have to crave the drug.

Looking back, my own actions seem unbelievable to me. How could I allow my 13-year-old daughter to sleep with a grown man for a few hundred dollars? Then I started taking another daughter too. Each time, I would just get high to try to forget.

## Running from My Past

I started getting high when I was 15. Now I realize that I was running from the pain of being molested by family



ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH DEEGAN

members and being abused.

Yes, I came from a two-parent home, went to Catholic school, never wanted for material things. However while my dad worked, my mom led a double life. She played cards and gambled all day. I was appointed official babysitter for my younger siblings and missed a lot of school. When I started messing up in school, my dad beat me. All the while, I was keeping my mother's secrets.

I also had to deal with being molested. It started when I was about 8 or 10 and my mother's father started touching me. As I got older, I came to understand that what he was doing was wrong. But I developed the attitude that giving up my body was OK as long as I was getting money. That was my first step toward prostitution. Later, I learned that he sexually abused my mother, too.

I believe that if I had not endured being molested I would not have even considered prostituting my children. I rationalized it by saying, "As long as you don't give it up for free then that's fine."

## Mother and Addict

I started smoking weed when I was 9 and cigarettes when I was 11. I started drinking at age 12. Then I started to run away a lot and use heavier and heavier drugs. When I started smoking crack at 15, I felt afraid of who and what I had become.

I had my oldest daughter at 15. I moved in with my baby's father. He was much older and very abusive. I used his money to get high; my love for money kept me with him throughout the years of abuse. When I got high, I was numb to all my pain and anguish.

I had my middle daughter at 18 and my third daughter at 21. Then, when

months, and got them back. Then I relapsed again.

## Enough Is Enough

When my middle daughter was 16, she finally said to herself, "Enough, I have to tell someone." So she went to family court and I ended up in Bedford Hills. I smoked crack the whole night before I was arrested. I guess I was trying to kill myself. When they came to get me, I was so high that I felt nothing.

I can honestly say that I thank my daughter for having the courage to put an end to what I was doing to them. She saved my life and my children's lives.

I know that my kids are still in a lot of pain, though. Now my oldest daughter, 20, is staying with her boyfriend. My middle and youngest daughters, 17 and 14, are together. My son is in a residential treatment center. Their father died of a heart attack some years back. I get sad when I think about my children. However, they are better where they are, because I wasn't a good mother.

## Facing My Crime

At the beginning of my prison sentence, I stayed medicated to help with the detox and depression. Once I stopped getting high, I had to face

**I decided that my opponent was my past and that to recover from my depression and shame, I needed to start to face my past head on.**

my youngest daughter was just 3 months old, I got pregnant with my son.

Finally my kids' father and I split up and my children got taken away while I was living in North Carolina. I came back to New York, went to an inpatient drug program for 27

my life. All I wanted to do was eat excessively and sleep.

At first, I didn't speak openly about my case. Then I started to read self-help books. The one book that helped me most was actually called "The Art of War." It states that you should face your opponent head on.

# Lying for Mom

BY ANONYMOUS

I decided that my opponent was my past and that to recover from my depression and shame, I needed to start to face my past head on.

Keeping my feelings bottled up was killing me. So I began a process of facing the facts of my addiction, my childhood abuse and, most of all, my crime. I also began to look at my crime through my daughters' eyes.

## Lots of Judgment

One of the hardest steps was finding someone to talk to. It's scary to open up when you've committed a child-related crime. I once had a conversation with an inmate who I thought I could open up to. I said, "I need to speak to someone because I'm feeling really bad."

"All right," she said.

Then I explained what I had done.

"How could you do that?" she asked. She seemed horrified.

After that, I felt even more ashamed.

But once I started to come to grips with my crime on my own, I really didn't care what people thought. Now I talk about my case in support groups and with women like myself. Most of them give me words of encouragement like, "Only God can judge you" or, "You have to forgive yourself" or, "It wasn't you, it was the drugs calling you."

## A Desire to Help Others

Talking about my case has helped me. That's why I want to start a support group. I think women like me need a safe place to open up so we can take responsibility for our actions, forgive ourselves and become productive people. I know it will be a process to get the group started, but I have 11 years.

I want to become someone that my kids can be proud of as they grow into adulthood. I have completed three different parenting groups. I've learned that their feelings matter. I've learned what it means to be a mother.

Recently, my oldest daughter came to see me in jail. She came with my mother. I cried and apologized to my daughter the whole time. I didn't expect her to ever want to see me again. So it was a blessing.

My middle daughter has asked the court for permission to see me, and she should be coming to see me soon. My daughters are both in therapy and their doctors said that it was all right to visit me. I am so happy that they are getting the help that I should've gotten as a kid. I hope that they will continue to heal.

I also hope that by telling my story, I can help someone else stop the cycle. I've come to the conclusion that I don't care if people judge me. I know that keeping secrets only hurt my family and me, and that if we hold back, we will never heal.

It is very hard to tell on the one you truly love.

I love my mother with all my heart, but she isn't doing what she needs to do to get my sister back home. I want my sister to grow up in her home because I know how hard it has been for me to grow up in foster care. But I worry that my sister will not be living somewhere safe if she goes home to my mother.

I'm not worried about me because I will soon be 18 and I can go live with my mother if I want. But my sister is younger and I don't want her to stay in foster care like I have.

## A No-Good Man

The first time I lied for my mother was last year, when I was 16. Back then, my mother was doing what she had to do in order to get my sister and me out of foster care. She was fighting with the system and the courts. She finished rehab, and got an apartment that was big enough for all of us—my mother, my sister and me.

The courts promised that after all this, my sister and I would go home. But that didn't happen. This made me very upset. They made a promise they did not keep.

My mother acted like she wasn't affected by this, but I knew that way deep down she was. Not long after that she met a man. Soon my mother's attitude became a careless one.

## My Sister and I Came Second

When I would go on weekend visits, each Saturday I would wake up excited for my sister's arrival at 12 p.m. But each afternoon my mother would arrive home without my sister. She would always have some lame excuse but I think my mother just never went to get my sister. I can only imagine how much my sister hurt.

But when I told my mother that she was messing up the process of getting my sister

back home, she said everything would be fine.

I knew it wouldn't, so I lied for my mother. I made excuses for her to my law guardian and my caseworker. I told them she was going to get my sister every weekend.

## Was Lying Right?

It made me mad to lie for my mom. Soon I found out that my mother's new man had gotten her back into drinking and smoking. That got me so furious.

I wondered whether she really loved my sister and me. I felt neglected all over again, like I did when I first went into care.

My sister doesn't want to be in care any longer and I don't blame her one bit. But another part of me knows that my mother is not quite on her feet. My mother thinks that she will make me be the parent to my



ILLUSTRATION BY LEE SAMUEL

sister, but my mother needs to understand that if my sister goes home, my sister will need her more than anything.

I tried to help my mother get better. I encouraged her, told her that I am ready to help her, and that she can make it through anything.

My mother's life is not as messed up as it was years before, but since she's started messing up again, the world has made a U-turn for me. For a while there, I thought for sure my sister and I were going home. Now I don't even know if that's a good idea. I don't know if I should keep on lying.

# ABOUT **Rise**

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and to guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org), help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at (646) 543-7099 or [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) for infor-

mation about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work.

Stories in this issue were written in a Rise writing group at the Children Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and peer support organization in East Harlem, NY, and in a writing group at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, organized through its Children's Center.

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## No Place for Fathers

*Being separated from my daughters hurt us all.*

BY LOUIS ANGEL



ILLUSTRATION BY YC

Before my kids went into foster care, their mother and I were addicted to meth. My own parents had been heavy into drugs. I always told myself that I wouldn't do that to my kids, but when my girls were little, I was no better than my parents.

At times, I was a good father. When my oldest daughter, Jasmine, learned to walk I would take her out and she was like a horse running in the wild again. She would run and run until her body was out of energy. I loved to see how happy she was.

But as my addiction grew, my ability to take care of my daughters declined. I don't have those kinds of loving memories about my middle daughter. It's painful to think that the only real memories I do have are being locked in my bedroom with my meth, in a prison of self-inflicted pain.

### Chances for Children

Eventually my kids went into foster care and I went into treatment. Soon

after I went into treatment, I talked to my social worker and counselor about being placed in a program with my children but I learned that there were no centers for fathers and children. As a result, my children and I were apart for 18 months.

I did not have enough time to bond with my daughters during visits. I saw my kids for only an hour a week at first. It was like going to a drive-through. The bond we had was difficult to express in the midst of the pain I felt about not being with them.

While in treatment I would hear fathers say about the mother, "I'll just let her do it all because she can get all the help anyways and when it's all over then I'll come back around." I think that's one way that fathers deal with the pain of separation. Maybe if more fathers had the chance to live with their children while in treatment, more children would have a chance of coming home.

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