



When a Parent Comes Home

Mentors sometimes wonder if they are still needed when their mentee's parent returns home from prison. It is a rare case when the answer is no. For insight into an incarcerated parent's experience, Seedling invited guest speaker Lauren Johnson, a formerly incarcerated parent, to share her personal story and the impact it has had on her family.

Lauren began her story by sharing a picture of a cute, bubbly, smiling girl, her teenage self at fourteen. This, she revealed, was the age she began experimenting with drugs, which led to addiction and her first arrest at the age of 16. Lauren's continuing life narrative described her struggles with drug use over many years, resulting in multiple arrests and incarcerations. The last time she was in prison, Lauren was married and had three young children. This, she thoughtfully shared, "was the first time I had a life worth missing."

Now that she has returned home, Lauren shares that she struggles with the overwhelming difficulty and frustration of finding her place in her family again. "They had learned to go about their daily lives without me." She related this struggle of "finding balance" in her family to the complexities of a baby mobile, a delicately balanced group of objects relying on one another to move smoothly. Inserting herself back into the lives of her family was like adding another piece to the mobile, throwing everything off balance and disrupting what was so hard to accomplish. To find a new balance, her family had to make sacrifices, and agree to new adjustments. This is a daily struggle for Lauren, finding her place.

Lauren's message to mentors is that you are in a unique position as a trusted friend to support your mentee with adjusting to a parent returning home. Consider that your mentee may have an unrealistic expectation of what life will be like, and be ready to listen to his/her feelings with an open mind. Recognize and acknowledge that there will be a transition period, and the new circumstances may present challenges for your mentee, parent and caregiver. Your consistent presence is a comfort. Your mentee may have to adapt to having both parents as caregivers. Differences in parenting philosophies can be sources of stress and conflict for the whole family. You are there to listen and offer hope. Additionally, a caregiver might have to adjust to co-parenting, which can be challenging after long periods of parenting alone. Possible custody hearings or other proceedings may be difficult. The homecoming may not live up to your mentee's expectations. Mentors should also consider that the current caregiver may no longer be a child's guardian after a parent's release. This transition is hard on everyone.

Ann Adalist-Estrin explains more about this topic in her article, "*Homecoming: Children's Adjustment to Parent's Parole*" [read more](#).

Take heart, as your mentee is not alone, and neither are you. Your Seedling Mentor Director can help you process your concerns around this issue and is just a phone call away.

The following resource was used to write this article: www.YOUTH.gov/COIP