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Helping Children Who Have an Incarcerated Family Member

Children who have a family member who has been incarcerated have experienced an adversity or stress and with that comes multiple emotional responses including but not limited to:

- Grief (for many things is not just the person who is absent)
- Anger
- Guilt
- Shame
- Sadness
- Relief

Although we once believed that children who experience adversities are more resilient than adults, we now know through brain research that the stress and emotional responses in the child can impact not only brain health and development, but also increase the risk of developing adverse physical health changes throughout adulthood. Brain science has shown us that the single most influential intervention for children experiencing adversities is a trusting relationship with one caring adult.

Processing Trauma
written by
Cheryl Strep, MS, LPC,
NCC, NCSC,
Trainer/Consultant

To quote Dr. Vincent J. Felitti (*co-author of the initial Adverse Childhood Experiences Study*), “*If it is predictable, it is preventable.*”

How the brain and body work together is an important piece for the caring adult to understand, not only for their own awareness, but also to teach this information to children (and other adults). Our brains are made to help us survive. When we feel threatened or overwhelmed, the part of our brain that helps us plan, make choices and stop ourselves from doing something we normally would not do is not working as well as it should. We can tell when it is not working well by how our body feels and what we are thinking.

Think of a time when you were afraid or in danger: your heart beats faster; you might feel jittery on the inside; your thoughts might be really fast or seem to stop altogether. When we feel this way, our brain is telling our body to be safe, and it slows down the part of the brain that helps us make good choices. We are reacting instinctively for our survival. When we are having a big emotion, the neurons in our middle brain are firing and the thinking part of our brains again is not able to function the way it normally does. That is why when we are angry we sometimes say and do things we later regret. Our brains work instinctively to help us survive. Sometimes we do not even know what has triggered our brains into the survival mode. What is most important for all adults to understand is that all behavior is a form of communication; if the child is fighting, running, or hiding they are in a state of fear and need safety; if a child is experiencing a big emotion, the child needs connection. If they are experiencing either of the first two states, the child cannot respond with thought and cannot fully process what you are saying. The good news is that we have ways that we can bring calm back to our body and mind. When we do that, we can use the thinking part of our brain again to make better decisions.

Kole, Elementary Student:

“I think it would be good for kids to read this book who have only one parent because one went to prison, there was a divorce, separation or whatever reason.”

Bernadine,
Grandmother Raising Kole:

Kole and I really enjoyed this book. It touches our hearts because I have a son that has an addiction and spent five years in the Department of Corrections. I reviewed the questions with Kole on why read the book and the questions were helpful. The important themes give valuable food for thought. We know about second chances and hope.”

First and foremost, as a caregiver, you must be able to regulate your own emotions so you are calm when the child is in chaos. Seek and experiment with various ways to help regulate your own emotions, then build the same skills with the child. When the child is calm, discuss and experiment with ways to calm down that feel comfortable for the child. (For ideas google: self-regulation for children or adults). Practice when the child is calm; model when you are feeling stressed. Remember: do not expect instant change in yourself or the child; the survival behaviors have been months or years in the making and using regulation takes time, skill and practice.

Everyone feels emotions differently in their body and for different reasons. We can be in the same situation standing right next to other people, and how our body and brain react can be completely different than anyone else's. We all need to learn ways that feel comfortable to change our energy. Some people like to sit quietly and think about breathing or talk to someone; some like to get active and run or shoot basketballs or tear up scrap paper, and others like to be creative and draw or write about their feelings. We need to know what works best for ourselves, so we can use those ideas when we need to feel calm inside.

One of the best ways to increase trust and understanding in a relationship is through attunement. When we attune to others, first we notice what is happening within our own body and mind. As we see someone else's behaviors or emotions acted out, we need self-regulation to stay calm and use the thinking part of our brain. We also notice what the child is doing and saying.

As a mother to children whose father has been repeatedly incarcerated and/or absent, *Marvin's Gift* is an invaluable resource! *Marvin's Gift* illustrates that diverse emotions are natural responses for the child. The book demonstrates the possibilities for healing that a relationship with an animal can offer. In addition, *Marvin's Gift* offers an explanation as to why people make bad decisions and that with help that comes from a variety of sources transformation is attainable. Finally, the importance of service and giving back as part of the solution to lifelong pain is beautifully exemplified in Marvin's training of Star to save a woman's life.

Kristin Lancaster,
Parent

Secondly, you should calmly state in a non-judgmental tone what the child is doing and what you think the child might be feeling. For example, “I see you sitting all alone. I am wondering if you are feeling sad or left out.” Or “I saw you throw your backpack down; you seem angry.” Do not worry if you are incorrect; the child will correct you if you are.

The next step is the most difficult to understand but it is also the most vital. Even if you do not name the behavior and the emotion (in the previous step), make sure you validate the emotion. This is not the same as accepting the child’s behavior. Instead, you are validating that the child is feeling an emotion. The best way to do this is to say, “It makes sense that you would be angry/sad/embarrassed/etc.” Even if you do not understand the emotion, but can validate that they are feeling it, this will build connection. Then you can respond with a co-regulation activity, or give safe time and space, or ask how you can help or simply thank them for sharing.

Letting others know that you hear and see their emotion builds a strong connection quickly. Do not rush to fix the problem. First, validate their emotion; sometimes there does not need to be a “fix” once the child is truly heard.

Building connection with a trusted, caring adult, learning and practicing regulation skills, builds the foundation for resilience and growth after adversity or stress.

There are some specific activities to help children who have separation from a family member due to incarceration.

- Do not dismiss emotions by saying, “It will be okay,” or “Don’t feel that way,” Instead say things like, “It is hard when…” or “It makes you feel ___ when ___.” Then reassure them who their support people are. Children want to know they are not alone.
- Help with feelings of guilt by assuring the child that they are not to blame for the family member breaking the law.
- Do activities that allow them to express feelings and explore all the different feelings they may be having. The internet has thousands of ideas and printable activities.
- Prepare them for visits, if allowed, by describing what they will see and hear. Include things like the loud doors closing, seeing guards with guns, what the buildings look like, and how they will be able to talk with the parent (behind glass or in a room with others, etc.).
- Keep a daily routine at home if possible. Children (and adults) feel less stress when things are more predictable and consistent. Include all the ideas mentioned in this document into a daily or weekly routine; this will help all family members.
- Besides visits, phone calls or video calls, find creative ways to help the child feel connected with the incarcerated family member.
 - Create crafts, art or stories to tell each other.
 - Create a vision board about the separated family member with pictures, sayings, or memories.
 - Make a daily journal or even one statement about each day to share.

Research tells us that the best way to help a child build resilience to an adverse experience is to be a trusted, caring adult and create an environment that feels physically and emotionally safe.

- Daily, put one statement about the day on a small piece of paper into a jar, then pull out a few to share during the next call or visit.
- Create a simple saying that reminds the child their family member still remembers them. For instance, each morning they can say, “Even though mom isn’t here, I will think of her and she will think of me today.”
- Have an adult read a new book to the child and then let the child keep the book.
- Write handwritten letters back and forth. Add a sentence or two each day.
- Pick a favorite song or poem and sing/recite it together.
- Remind the child every day that you love them and so does the separated family member.
- Create a “Paper hug.” Before the family member has to leave, or if possible during a visit, have the adult lie down onto a long piece of paper (strong gift wrapping paper works) with their arms stretched out to their sides. Trace the arms, hands and fingers of the adult. When they stand up, connect the two arms to make a long virtual hug. Some people laminate the paper, or you can use a piece of material to make the hugging arms last longer.

“I received a copy of the book and crochet dog from the Professional Educator’s Representative. I use your book as a resource to talk to students about incarcerated parents and second chances. My students love holding Star as I read the book. We discuss the meaning of the book and talk about how everyone can earn a second chance. The book has a more meaningful story because the setting is in our state. Students feel that it can be a possibility for their parents to have another chance. Thank you for passing this resource tool along to counselors in Oklahoma. Love the Book! Thank you for an awesome book!”

Robin Syas Little
 School Counselor
 Okmulgee Elementary

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- Use resources to find and download books for children about incarceration. Sesame Street In Communities has many online books, videos, games and downloadable activities for families with incarcerated family members. Below you will find listings of other online resources that were valid when this was published.

Resources for Children and Families with Incarcerated Family Members

Sesame Street in Communities topic: Incarceration (The rest of the site is amazing, too.)

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration/>

Great list of books to read with children:

<https://www.shellydurkee.com/resources-for-children-of-inmates/>

More book lists:

<https://www.justicestrategies.org/coip/blog/2020/03/resources-activities-children-incarcerated-parents-during-covid-19-quarantine>

Rutgers Parent Library site:

<https://nrccfi.camden.rutgers.edu/the-children-of-incarcerated-parents-library/>

OKDKS toolkit

<http://www.okdhs.org/OKDHS%20Publication%20Library/14-63.pdf>

Tip sheet for educators

<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/federal-tools-resources/tip-sheet-teachers>

National institute of corrections children of incarcerated parents:

<https://nicic.gov/children-of-incarcerated-parents>

Guide books for families:

<https://youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents/tools-guides-resources>

Social services child welfare toolkit (this is 10 years old):

<http://www.parentinginsideout.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Social-Services-Child-Welfare-Toolkit.pdf>

Resources to Understand the Brain and Body Connection and Building Positive Experiences to Mitigate Trauma's Impact

Brain Animation series by Sentis: short videos explaining the brain and emotions

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL53nCCeNj-RQDhbjE9LjvnFad-wdB5bw7>

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University: multiple short videos explaining the brain, how relationships buffer stress, and other interventions

<https://www.youtube.com/user/HarvardCenter>

Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: Insights for Educators by Bruce Perry.

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=stress+trauma+and+the+brain+insights+for+educators

Child Trauma Academy library: articles and videos about child development, the brain, and interventions

<https://www.childtrauma.org/cta-library>

--Resources by Cheryl Step, MS, LPC, NCC, NCSC [Creating Resilience, LLC](#)

Marvin's Shining Star



Marvin's Shining Star is dedicated for the children of the incarcerated and Sister Pauline, whose vision began the prison dog program.

By John Otto and
Payton Otto.

Processing exercises
for *Marvin's Shining
Star* by Sharon Heatly,
Director of Counseling
and Student
Advocacy, Norman
Public Schools

Why write this book?

Any Oklahoma teacher can look in their classroom to see the reasons why this effort to acknowledge and support children who have an incarcerated parent is critical. Every day there are children who are invisible to others enduring their pain from having a parent or parents in prison. *When a parent or guardian goes to prison so does the child.* Many times children have witnessed violence and illegal drug usage before the actual arrest so the trauma begins. The child's home is torn apart, the child often having to move in with relatives or be placed in foster care. The loss of the primary caretaker and financial income changes everything in their world. Anger and shame affect all aspects of their lives including their emotional well-being, behavior and success in school. When children and teens are exposed to violence before the age of 18, it affects how they think about themselves and their view of the world around them. We cannot change their past but we can help youth overcome negative experiences to become

resilient. Building positive relationships is a key to helping them trust again.

Why Children of Incarcerated Parents Need Advocates

- Oklahoma is number one in the number of incarcerated females in the nation.
- Oklahoma is number two in male incarceration.
- Oklahoma is number one in the nation in incarceration rates, when other factors such as the juvenile and jail populations are included, according to a 2018 study by the nonprofit organization Prison Policy Initiative.
- Oklahoma is number 9 per capita in substantiated child abuse cases, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events experienced before age 18. This includes all forms of child abuse, having a household member who is incarcerated, exposure to domestic violence, neglect, and having a parent with an untreated mental illness or substance use disorder.
- ACEs can disrupt brain development causing social, emotional, and cognitive problems throughout an individual's life, which increase the likelihood of risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, difficulty functioning at school/work, and even early death.

The latest information on Oklahoma children who have or had an incarcerated parent is from 2016-2017. At that time, there were 135,303 children with incarcerated parents according to the KIDSCOUNT Data Book, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Oklahoma ranks 45th out of 50 states for the well-being of children and teens. 36% of children live in single-parent families. 22% of children live in poverty. 36% of children and teens (ages 10-17) are overweight or obese.

KIDSCOUNT 2020, Profile, Annie E. Casey Foundation.

This activity is for processing with a class or small student group for the book *Marvin's Shining Star*.

Students will be able to:

- Recognize emotions.
- Identify positive and negative behaviors.
- Define empathy and give examples from the story.
- Identify positive feelings about making good choices.
- Identify ways to help yourself or to encourage others to change behaviors.
- Develop a personal safety plan to stay emotionally healthy.

Show students the cover of the book

Ask students what might happen in this story. This type of questioning will help students become curious about the content of the story. Share with students the authors of the book and their interests.

Short summary of the book

This is a story about a boy who grew into a man who made many bad decisions. His actions led him to prison, but he learned that he could change his behavior to help animals and people again. Marvin trained Star, his search and rescue dog, to have a purpose and a new home. The power of having a second chance can change everything.

Classroom or Small Group Expectations:

- Everyone is safe physically and emotionally.
- Everyone is a listener as others are speaking.
- Everyone will have a chance to speak.
- Every comment is treated with respect.

Activity after reading

Today we are going to talk about the story you just heard. This may remind you of someone. I encourage you to talk, but we want to be respectful and not use anyone's name. Sometimes stories make us think about things that have happened to friends or it could have happened to you. Just remember to say a person or friend instead of a name. If you would like to share something, but it is hard to share in a group, I will be glad to talk to you later when we are by ourselves.

Think about the story

An **EMOTION** is a person's inner feelings. It is how you feel inside. Some examples are happy, joy, angry, scared and guilty. Everyone has feelings that are painful, so it is important to understand that **all** feelings are okay.

- What feelings did Marvin have when he kept doing things he knew were wrong, but his brother wanted him to do them anyway?
- What feelings did Marvin have when he was caught by the police?
- How do you think Marvin felt about having to go to prison?
- Can you name feelings that the family may have had when Marvin went to prison?

Sometimes when we feel a big emotion, our actions, words or behaviors might not be okay. It is important to learn ways to use emotions and energy that do not hurt others or ourselves.

- How did some of the things Marvin said hurt others?
- Later in the story, what were some of the things that Marvin did that helped himself and others?

Knowledge is power! I grew up with a father that was incarcerated. As a child I could have used a book like *Marvin's Shining Star* to open the lines of communication. When you have a parent that is incarcerated, people whisper about you and feel sorry for you. They talk about how you are damned to the same experiences and no one ever asked how I felt. I thought I was damned to carry on the same legacy of incarceration. *Marvin's Shining Star* will allow children to open up about their feelings about their parent's incarceration. It will also help redeem yourself from the mistakes you have made and you are not doomed to a legacy of nothingness.

Marva Griffin, RN
Marvin's Daughter

It is important to first understand how your brain and body react to big emotions. Everyone feels emotions differently in their body and for different reasons. We all need to learn ways that feel comfortable to change our energy. Some people like to sit quietly and think about breathing or talk to someone; some like to get active and run or shoot basketballs or tear up scrap paper, and others like to be creative and draw or write about their feelings. We need to know what works best for ourselves so we can use those ideas when we need to. Often, we do these things when we need to feel calm inside.

- What are some ways you change your energy or feelings when you need to? (Some students may give ideas to increase their energy level. Best practice is to do activities that both energize or calm.)
- What do you do when you want to feel calm? (Ask this if students have only addressed ways to energize.)

When we know how to calm our brains and bodies after experiencing a big emotion, then we can use that energy in a different way. *Learning to turn some emotions around is important.* First, we have to know what calm feels like and how to help our own bodies feel calm. Then we can learn to turn “hurt emotions” into something positive or good. This helps us come back; sometimes this is becoming resilient. Turning feelings like anger, fear or guilt into something positive is hard work, but you will learn to make positive changes.

EMPATHY is being able to understand how someone else is feeling. You may have heard the expression “put yourself in someone else’s shoes.” To understand how someone else might feel we begin by thinking about how we might feel if the situation happened to us. Having empathy helps us understand ourselves and other people.

- Where did the story take place?
- Have you visited or lived on a farm?
- Tell me about Marvin when he was young and things he liked to do.
- Describe how Marvin changed as he was growing up.
- What feelings have you had that Marvin experienced, too?
- Do you think it is okay to stop listening to your parents?
(There are situations where children might recognize that their parents have put them in unsafe situations or asked them to lie to prevent negative outcomes. Be prepared for these answers if they arise. Ask how the child felt in that situation and validate that feeling. An easy way to validate is to say, “It makes sense you would feel____.”

Small or big choices
happen to everyone.

CHANGING OUR THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS: Sometimes people lie to protect people. A lie is when you say something that is not true. It really did not happen. Marvin started telling one lie, and it led to another lie. Then, it was harder to tell the truth. Sometimes we lie or have other behaviors we usually would not have because we feel scared or have other big emotions. Our brains are made to help us survive. When we feel threatened or overwhelmed, the part of our brain that helps us plan, make choices and stop ourselves from doing something we normally would not do is not working as well as it should. We can tell when it is not working well by how our body feels and what we are thinking. Think of a time when you were afraid you might be hurt: your heart beats faster; you might feel jittery on the inside; your thoughts might be really fast or seem to stop altogether. When we feel this way, our brain is telling our body to be safe and slows down the part of the brain that makes us decide what a good choice would be. So, sometimes we make decisions we wish we had not made.

We have ways that we can bring calm back to our body and mind. When we do that, we can use the thinking part of our brain again to make better decisions. Sometimes people count to ten when they feel overwhelmed, angry or scared. Some people take deep slow breaths. Other people like to run, draw, curl up in a corner or many other things until the calm feeling can return.

- What are some ways that you help yourself feel calm?



The above crocheted dog is Star. The inmates of Mabel Bassett Correctional Center crocheted dogs to be given to schools with the *Marvin's Shining Star* book.

A **CONSEQUENCE** is something that happens after you act in a particular way. A consequence can be positive or negative. A negative consequence is something that happens that we do not like; and a positive consequence is something that makes us and others feel okay or even good. We know that to have thoughtful actions with positive consequences, we have to feel calm first. We usually feel better when we focus on acting in positive ways so we help ourselves and others feel okay.

- Do you think Marvin could have had a better consequence in this situation, if he had said or done something differently?
- What would be another way that Marvin could have handled the situation?

Sometimes it is hard to know the right thing to do. You have to really think about the consequences. Think about a time when you had a tough decision about doing the right thing; like saying you do not have homework when you really do, or not including someone at recess when you knew they wanted to play. These decisions change the type of person we become.

- How do you decide to do the right thing in a tough situation?
- How did that make you feel?

In our book, Marvin and Tyrone did something terrible to another person when they broke into the person's home. Marvin then lied to police and went to jail for a long time.

Dr. Otto,

The student that I am reading your book with is a second grader. He is being raised by his grandmother. My little buddy shared with me that his Dad was in prison since he was three years old for hurting someone. He will be getting out this summer if all goes well. He told me that someone was bullying him and he had never told anyone. After being a school counselor for 24 years, this has been a very moving experience for me to read your book to a little boy whose dad was in prison. Although I have known this boy for over two years and he has spent considerable time with me, he has told me more in the last six weeks than he has ever shared. I want to express my appreciation to you on behalf of all the children and counselors in Oklahoma that your book has helped and will continue to help. I wish to express my gratitude and sincere thanks for all the countless hours you have given to this project.

Bonnie Meisel
Nationally Certified
School Counselor
Norman Public Schools

Marvin missed many things about living on a farm, seeing his family and friends and seeing the animals he loved. This was a hard time for Marvin and his family. It was hard for his family and daughter to live without having him home. Later, when Marvin worked with Star, he felt proud of himself and realized how good it feels to help other people.

HOPE is when you plan and carry out positive things to make something happen that you want in your life. When we feel safe and have people that believe in us, it is easier to use our thinking brain to make decisions, plan goals, and do what we need to do to achieve those goals. In the story, the new prison program brought hope.

- Can you remember the Warden's announcement that made Marvin excited and have a new attitude about his actions?
- What were some of the ways that Marvin started changing?
- Have you ever changed your thoughts, actions or behavior because you wanted something?
- What made you decide to change?

In the story, Marvin changed and so did the life of the rescue dogs. Many sad things had happened to these dogs, and they were without a home. The dogs already had many bad habits they had learned as pups. Some people might think they weren't the right dogs to be trained because of their bad habits. If someone believed they could become a search and rescue dog, they could have a home again.

- Why did Marvin name his dog "Star"?

- How did Marvin train Star?
- How did Star become a hero?

Marvin worked long and hard training Star. Star's work and practice paid off when he saved a woman who was lost. Marvin also worked to change his own thinking and behavior. With his hard work over numerous years, the governor pardoned Marvin from prison because he showed he could make better decisions to help himself and others.

Both Marvin and Star had a second chance at life. They had a chance to be part of their family. Marvin had a chance to be with his daughter that he missed after the numerous years in prison.

- Would you give someone a second chance? Why or why not?

Going deeper, helping yourself or others

- What if you knew someone in your school whose mom or dad were in prison; how could you help them?
- What if you had a family member in prison; how would you take care of yourself to feel better?
- What trusting adult or friend would you be able to talk to when you feel scared, angry or overwhelmed?

Marvin's Gift



Marvin's Gift written by John Otto and Payton Otto.

Post treatment exercises for *Marvin's Gift* by Sharon Heatly, Director of Counseling and Student Advocacy at Norman Public Schools

***Marvin's Gift*, Post Treatment Exercises**

Learning to make positive choices even when there appear to be few choices is life-altering for a child who has experienced traumatic events. *Mavin's Gift* is rich in developing dialogue with children to give them hope for building a healthy and safe tomorrow. This book was written with two major themes: 1) to provide tools for children to make positive choices in their lives and restore self-efficacy; 2) to inspire adults to develop meaningful relationships with children who are experiencing parental separation due to incarceration. The power of a caring adult whether a teacher, counselor, parent, guardian, neighbor, adult friend or community member can redirect a child's mindset to focus on hope for their future. A positive relationship with a child can grow just by saying, "You Matter."

"I'm convinced that when we help children find healthy ways of dealing with their feelings...ways that don't hurt them or anyone else...we're making the world a safer, better place." Fred Rogers, also known as Mr. Rogers; American television host, author, producer and Presbyterian minister.

Marvin's Gift

Emma and Logan are brother and sister who are sometimes upset with each other and act in hurtful ways. Words are said that can harm feelings.

- When Emma is playing with Twinkles, why is that important to her?
- Why do you think Logan is upset with Emma?
- How does that make Emma feel?
- Is Logan really mad at Twinkles?

Sometimes our actions do not tell people what we are really feeling. Sometimes it is hard for a person to know what feelings are going on inside of us.

- How do you figure out what's really going on with your feelings when you are upset?
- What do you do to help yourself feel better?

In this story, Logan was hurt by his father. His father had hit him and he was bruised. No one should be hurt by anyone. Logan did the right thing to tell a trusted adult such as a parent, teacher, school counselor, principal or someone he really trusted. In Oklahoma, there are laws to protect children, teens and adults from being victims of physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect. Telling a trusted adult keeps you safe. Everyone deserves to be safe. There are grown-ups who will help children, so it is important to tell a safe adult that you are in danger.

- Why was Logan angry?
- What do you think you would do to help Logan feel better? (Looking for: listening to him, encouraging Logan to talk to a safe adult about the abuse, or telling a school counselor that you are worried about a friend being hurt.)

“Although children may be victims of fate, they will not be victims of our neglect.”

John F. Kennedy,
35th U.S. President

Fear turned inward comes out as depression, and fear turned outward comes out as anger.

- What could a friend do to help another friend who was hurt? (Looking for: talking to your mom and dad to get help for a friend, talking to your teacher or school counselor, telling a trusted adult so they will call the Department of Human Services or local police department for help.)

In this story, a magical thing happened.

- Can you share what happened?
- Do you think Logan was scared?
- Was Emma feeling the same way?

For the facilitator: Children exposed to family violence often have difficulty processing school work and managing their emotions. Sometimes loud outbreaks and angry behaviors overpower them because they are scared and overwhelmed. As a teacher or caring adult, we must manage our own emotions and not overreact to inappropriate behaviors or responses. When a teacher/adult is calm, there is a greater likelihood that the child will be able to regulate and calm. Best practice is to stay calm, use active listening and talk slowly in a low, soft voice. Keep reassuring the child that they are safe and encourage the child to breathe deep, while you continue to listen. A simple act of offering water or a snack after they have had time to express themselves can sometimes redirect their focus and calm the stress response system.

In this story, Marvin shared an important message from his life. He shared that he had run away earlier in his life because he made several poor decisions.

- Can you remember the bad decisions that Marvin made?
- Does running away ever solve a problem?

Dear School Counselors,
Teachers, Principals,
Parents, Guardians and
Adult Friends,

Thank you for investing in the children before you. Never underestimate how powerful your role can be in helping a child to begin to trust again. This endeavor to promote resiliency can help children who have incarcerated parents as well as children who have been victims of childhood trauma begin to heal. The barriers for children with incarcerated parents are many; but each positive relationship with a caring adult may help a child learn to see the world differently.

With hope,
Sharon Heatly
Director of Counseling and
Student Advocacy
Norman Public Schools

- Do you think Logan was hurting when he wanted to run away?

Marvin believed people can change and learn to make good decisions. Sometimes it is hard to change your thoughts and your actions. Marvin learned an important thing in trying to change his behaviors. He learned that there are safe adults that can help children learn better ways to think and act. Children can learn to help themselves to become problem solvers. Learning to be a problem solver not only helps in the immediate situation but also helps with future challenges.

For the Facilitator: These problem-solving steps are to assist if the child asks questions about learning to solve a problem they are experiencing. If we can help children learn the most positive way to solve a problem, they become confident in their ability to navigate their world. Children need to know that sometimes problems are out of their control and adults need to intervene.


Simple Steps to Guide Children in Problem Solving to Make Good Decisions

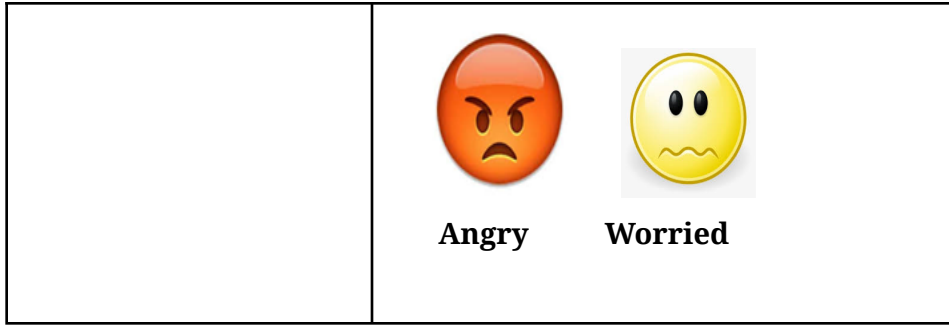
1. Identify how you feel.	Calm down and take deep breaths. What are you feeling?
2. Why are you upset?	You need to know what the problem is so you can make a good decision on how to act. Talking to an adult can help.
3. Think of different ways that you can solve the problem.	Think of the many different ways that you can solve the problem; some will be good ways and others not so good. A solution could work one time and not the next. Think about what will keep you safe and help you overcome the problem. Think about what

	message your actions or words are sending to others.
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4. What would happen if I chose a solution?	<p>Look at each idea and think about: will it hurt someone else, will it help me feel better, who will be my support if I need more help? Will this help me become the person I want to be when I grow up? You may choose to help the child rate the solution on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the best choice.</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>Best Possible Undecided</p> <p>Keep trying Not Good</p>
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5. Select the best solution.	Try out your solution. Always think about what will help keep me safe and what adult can I ask for help.
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<p>Feelings Chart to use with Step One for younger children.</p> <p>Today I am feeling.....</p>	 <p>Happy Shy Sad</p> <p>Angry</p>
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- Have you ever made a mistake and then learned a new way to act?
- Who can help you learn new ways to work through sad or hurtful events?
- Marvin had another special friend. Can you remember who that was?

Marvin was lucky to have a special friendship with an abandoned dog that was trained to be a therapy dog. Marvin learned to train and take care of Star, which helped him to start thinking differently about his feelings and actions. Star knew that having the right adult friends could change everything about you. Marvin and Star were both changing for the better. Marvin and Star were healing each other.

Where was Marvin living when he met Star?

- Have you been in a situation when a friend was sad because other people were talking about them?
- Can you tell me what empathy means to you?

- What can you do to help your friend? Would having empathy for a friend's situation make a difference? (Looking for not joining the negative talk, telling others that it is not a friend's fault, sometimes it is important to tell a teacher. The child supporting a friend should not be put in a difficult position. Children do not have resources to handle true bullying behaviors but safe adults do.)
- Emma said many positive things. Can you remember?
- How does a family help each other?

Marvin told Emma and Logan about a brave action that Star did to help an elderly woman.

- Why did Star keep looking for the elderly woman?
- How do you think Marvin felt when Star did such a brave act to save the woman?

The magical part of this story is that Marvin is an angel that came to help Logan and Emma. Marvin said, "I fix things." Marvin shared with Logan and Emma an important message. Marvin said it is okay to be angry but running away is never the answer. Everyone gets angry but learning to calm down and re-think the situation helps a person make better decisions. There is always someone who can help you out. It is important to tell your family and people you trust.

- How did Marvin fix things?
- Can you share a time when you were angry and you learned to calm yourself down?
- What did you do to calm down?

Marvin's Gift



Marvin's Gift written by John Otto and Payton Otto.

Screenplay written and directed by Peter and Julia Zhumski. It is adapted from the children's book, *Marvin's Gift*.

Processing exercises written by Jeremy Elledge, LCSW, Therapist, Trauma Specialist

***Marvin's Gift*, Screenplay Processing Activity**

Sometimes we have good reasons to feel bad. People who tell us not to feel our real feelings don't seem to understand, do they?

Sometimes bad things happen to normal, good kids.

Logan and Emma are normal kids, with normal, mad and sad feelings after a bad thing happened in their family.

- What were some of the things that made them feel mad and sad in the story?
- What other types of bad things make "normal" kids mad or sad?

When bad things happen, it's okay to be upset. Angry, sad and scared feelings are perfectly "normal" after something traumatic happens to us or our families. These feelings do not feel good, but it's important to know they are normal. Some feelings do hurt, but no feelings are wrong. We need our brain to tell us when

something is wrong.

It's important to say how you feel. When we are hurting inside, we might want to try to hide it, not talk about it, pretend bad feelings are not there so maybe they will go away.

- How did Logan try to hide his feelings?
- How did he show his mad and sad feelings anyway?

Mad, sad, upset feelings sometimes do not go away on their own. These feelings come from a part of our brain that uses electricity to send emotional 'signals'. When we ignore these signals for our feelings, they often get stronger, louder, like an alarm going off. Our brain tries to let us know when something is wrong, and it hurts us inside when we ignore what our brain is telling us.

Feelings we do not say come out in what we do, how we treat other people. Logan was not really angry with his sister Emma.

- Who was he really angry at?
- Who did he hurt with his angry actions?

Feelings are different from actions. Feelings that don't feel good do not have to turn into negative actions. Doing negative things with our feelings usually just makes us feel worse.

Unhappy, hurt feelings need to come out. When we do not let our mad or sad feelings out, they grow and become like poison. It becomes bad for us, and usually those we care about. But they don't have to.

- How do you let your feelings out? (some group discussion may be good here.)

Has anyone ever told you to not be mad?

How about to cheer up and not be down?

It's important to say how you really feel about a situation.

Some ideas...

Tell a friend, teacher, family member, counselor...sometimes it just helps to tell someone when we're having a bad day, or a bad feeling.

- Write a letter...sometimes the best way to say difficult things to people who have hurt us, but a great way to get feelings out.
- Various forms of art, music, poetry...It doesn't always have to be positive, real art for real feelings.
- Get help...finding a safe place to talk about our feelings is one of the best ways to feel better.
- Working with animals! Furry friends and other pets can provide amazing support as well as PURPOSE, when humans just won't do!

These questions are some more in-depth concepts, perhaps for older students and for perhaps more clinical discussions.

Positive Science for HOPE

- Do people tell you to be more positive?
- That may be easy for them to say, when they don't get it, when it hasn't happened to them.

Positive thinking is very helpful, yet difficult when life has not been very positive for us.

Positive thinking leads to more positive feelings in our brain, which leads us to take more positive actions. When we think good, we feel good and then we do good.

It also goes the other way. Negative thoughts lead to more negative

emotions and actions. When bad things happen to us, when people treat us negatively, we can start to think in very negative ways that only make things worse. When we are mistreated and hurt, we might start treating ourselves negatively. We can start to think in ways that discourage and hurt our own feelings and actions. We can learn to think negatively, feel worse, and then do badly. It becomes a vicious cycle; the more negative we think and feel, the more negative actions we do, leading to more bad feelings, actions and consequences.

Some people think that's just the way it is, how their brain works. But we can learn to use our brain better.

Thinking more positively lets you use the "smart" part of your brain more. When life has been positive, thinking positively may be easier to do. What about when life has not been positive? We can still learn to use the best parts of our brain in the best ways. We have to learn to identify negative thoughts when we're thinking them so we can challenge them, figure out ways for them not to be true.

These are connected in the brain, in this order of the process.

THOUGHTS...FEELINGS...ACTIONS

- What bad thing happened to Logan and his family?
- What were some of Logan's negative thoughts? (I have no one, no one loves me, no one understands).
- What feelings came after the negative thoughts for Logan?

Logan was hurting.

- Did he do anything in the story to make himself feel worse?

-
- How did Marvin help Logan challenge his negative thoughts and actions?
 - What did Logan do in the story that might have helped himself to feel better?
 - How did Star help Marvin?
 - Why did helping Star get over her trauma help Marvin to get over his trauma?

These questions would be appropriate for small educational counseling groups with middle or high school students who have identified as having an incarcerated parent.

- Do we ever get mad at people we love?
- Do we ever love people who do bad things?
- Does our heart ever have more than one feeling?

What is “normal”? When bad things happen to us, sometimes bad things start to feel “normal.” “Normal” just means familiar. Logan experienced child abuse, a bad thing done by his father.

- What bad things could Logan have learned from being abused?
- When people hurt us what do we learn as “normal”?
- How can this affect how we treat others?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS...

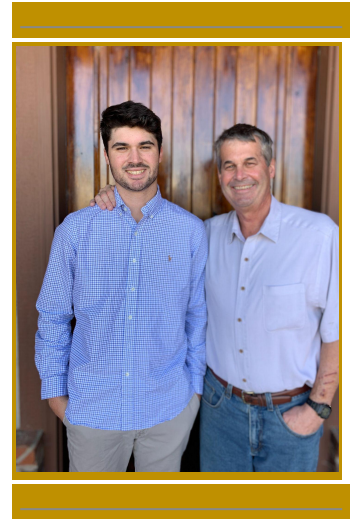
Marvin's Gift is the third book for this father-son team. They have also produced a teleplay entitled *Marvin's Gift*. Their second book, *Sarge: The Veteran's Best Friend*, was an Oklahoma best-seller and was featured at the state book fair. **Dr. John Otto** has been a veterinarian for 30 years and a volunteer for the prison program **Friends for Folks** for 24 years. He lives on a hobby farm in Norman, Oklahoma with his wife Patti, two sons, Grant and Payton and many rescue pets.

Payton Otto is a junior at the University of Oklahoma pursuing a BBA in Business. He also has an associate's degree from McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas where he was an academic All-American Collegiate Golfer.

Peter Zhmutski and Julia Zhmutski, Daughter

Peter Zhmutski was born in the former Soviet Union. He has worked in the film industry for 24 years, creating more than 25 films mostly as a director, producer and actor. Because of his numerous international film merits and awards, the United States government has acknowledged Zhmutski as "an extraordinary filmmaker" and granted him citizenship for contributing his talents to the American film industry. Zhmutski resides in Norman OK with his wife Yulia and two children Julia and Nickolas.

Julia Zhmutski was born in Norman, Oklahoma. Since she was little, she was always fascinated with different forms of Arts. She became a competitive dancer and appeared in several of her father's movies. Julia is an avid gamer with her own YouTube channel: Julia Girly Gamer. She loves fashion, design, traveling, and aspires to be an actress. Her secret passion is studying tornadoes. Julia speaks



different languages and hopes to travel the world and make videos about it.

Jeremy Elledge

Meet NewView Healing Solutions founder Jeremy Elledge, whom our team has lovingly nicknamed “The Force”! He received his MSW from the University of Oklahoma in 2005 and is a licensed clinical social worker, full-time therapist and mental health professional, clinical supervisor, and one of a limited number of Trauma Network Specialists. His early work was in direct-care for crisis stabilization for youth in acute and residential settings, and he later helped head-up Specialists in Oklahoma trained by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, one of the first trauma grants in Oklahoma to help improve systems and services to be more trauma-informed and effective. Jeremy also directed implementation for the Sanctuary and START Models for trauma-informed organizational culture and change, now working and supervising in out-patient therapy for kids and families. Jeremy enjoys teaching about the work, but his first passion and commitment is to DO the work of helping injured populations heal.

Jeremy has developed his own approach and philosophy to therapy, greatly influenced by some of the leading experts in the field of treatment with trauma. Jeremy is trained and certified as a ‘professor’ and trainer for the Sanctuary and START Models, later going on to develop original training for continuing education of licensed mental health professionals. Jeremy taught parenting education for nearly 10 years and has been a proud employee for the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services, in addition to treatment roles in both private and non-profit settings spanning more than 16 years. He currently serves as lead trainer for the Evolution Foundation, heads up

NewView, and has a book coming out soon...

Jeremy has overcome his own personal trauma, in addition to losing much of his sight over the last decade, yet this hardly slows him down. He has overcome many obstacles and has become known as one of Oklahoma's highly skilled and effective clinicians, a leader in the field of trauma and mental health. Jeremy hopes to inform and inspire others to overcome injuries and setbacks, to go from surviving to thriving! His approach to informing the injured upon their own injuries and injured patterns has found much success in helping injured people stop doing the injured things that keep them from healing, and living. Our fearless leader truly embodies his own motto and mantra... don't let your obstacles become your excuses.

Cheryl Step

Cheryl Step has spent the past few years as a trainer and consultant for Head Start agencies and schools across the country. She facilitates training that helps foster trauma integration with children and families, as well as consulting with leadership to build trauma informed agencies. Previously, Cheryl was an elementary school counselor in Oklahoma for 17 years. She began her career as a therapist in a residential treatment center for sexually abused girls and as a child therapist in a community mental health center. She is certified in Traumatic Stress Studies by the Trauma Center and Trauma Research Center and in ARC (Attachment, Regulation, Competency) Trauma Treatment for Children and Adolescents. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor and a Nationally Board Certified Counselor and School Counselor. She holds a Master's Degree in Counselor Education from Syracuse University. She recently moved back to Oklahoma and established her own training and consulting company, Creating Resilience, LLC.

Sharon Heatly

Sharon Heatly is the Director of Counseling and Student Advocacy for Norman Public Schools. She has a mission to effectively advance a system-wide effort to create academic success for youth that also addresses the numerous challenges that they may have encountered. Sharon has served as an elementary, mid-high and high school counselor in several school districts which also includes working in Germany with the Department of Defense Schools. She also served seven years as an on site evaluator for the U.S. Department of Education, Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. Early in her career, Sharon became aware that education is critical, but physical and emotional safety has to come first for well-being and success. Her focus has been on trauma-informed practices, evidence-based prevention programs and effective interventions that enhance overall youth outcomes. Sharon oversees a Victim of Crimes (VOCA) grant which provides student advocacy coordinators in a school setting for students who are victims of crime and also provides school-based therapy. Sharon continues to serve on the Friends for Folks Board, University of Oklahoma Southwest Prevention Center Regional Epidemiological Outcomes Task Force, Bridges Board (Empowering High School Students in Family Crisis to Pursue Education Without Obstacles) and Assistance League of Norman member. Sharon recently received the Lifetime Achievement Award in School Counseling from the Oklahoma School Counseling Association and 50 Women Who Make A Difference by the *Journal Record*. She is the recipient of Bethesda Inc. Maggie Johnson Service Award, 2021.



