



GIL VAKNIN, SESAME WORKSHOP

## Parent in jail? Meet a Muppet who relates

New Web tools from 'Sesame Street' offer kids support, advice

**Molly Vorwerck**

@mkvorwerck  
USA TODAY

From the ABCs to do-re-mi, *Sesame Street* has covered it all. Now Big Bird, Elmo and the gang are addressing a new topic: prison.

*Sesame Street's* new Little Children, Big Challenges program is a series of online tool kits for children and parents dealing with adversity. Issues include not just prison, but also bullying, divorce and relocation.

The tool kit (at [sesamestreet.org](http://sesamestreet.org), under Topics and Activities) contains videos, games and handouts offering advice and encouragement.

In one video, Alex, a Muppet whose father is in prison, is faced with a wave of questions from his puppet peers about the meaning of "carceration." Sofia, a neighbor, explains that "incarceration is when a parent breaks a grown-up rule — a law — and has to go to jail."

Alex's story will not be part of the regular *Sesame Street* TV show.

Jeanette Betancourt, vice president for outreach and educational practices at Sesame Workshop, says the program is meant to give children like Alex support and comfort.

"We are looking not at the cause of the incarceration, but at the impact on the lives of children and their caregivers," she says.

Reviews have been positive since the program's debut this month at a White House event, she says. "We're tackling this very difficult topic, but also acknowledging this very invisible community. We've heard quite a bit from adults who experienced this as children and who never talked about it out of guilt or shame."

One in 28 U.S. children have at least one parent in prison, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Patrick Fagan, director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute, a research organization, says the program is a good idea and should also tackle out-of-wedlock parenthood, because married people with kids are less likely to be in jail than unwed parents.

Melissa Henson of the Parents Television Council, which promotes family-friendly entertainment, says the Sesame Workshop's decision to shed light on a delicate issue will provide valuable support for marginalized children.

"According to some statistics, there are more kids who have parents in jail than who have a parent serving abroad," she says. "There is no reason to penalize the child who had no part in that wrongdoing. Rather than make them feel stigmatized or isolated, it's better to give them those beneficial resources."

**Sofia, left, Abby and Rosita comfort Alex, whose dad is in prison, in the Little Children, Big Challenges initiative. Alex's story won't be part of the *Sesame Street* TV show.**