

# Fathers in Prison: Impact of Parenting Education

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## Abstract

*As the male prison population increases, so too does the number of children with fathers in prison. The negative impact of fatherlessness on children has been well documented. While parenting education is often seen as an effective tool to improve the quality of family relationships and foster positive outcomes for children, fathers in prison frequently are ignored or excluded from parenting programs. This mixed methods study examined the impact of short term parenting education on fathers in prison who were enrolled in a 3-day parenting class. A simple experimental design was coupled with individual interviews. Quantitative results indicate that fathers' knowledge and attitudes changed significantly with respect to use of corporal punishment and role reversal; qualitatively, fathers reported significant changes in other areas. This study has implications for prison parenting programs.*

## Introduction

As the male prison population increases, so too does the number of children with fathers in prison. Recent data indicates that the number of men in jail doubled between 1987 and 1997 (Garfinkel et.al., 1998). In the year 2002, the prison and jail population exceeded 2 million for the first time (Harrison, 2003). Many of these prisoners are also fathers. Turner & Peck (2002) identified 93% of incarcerated parents who are fathers. A recent life skills demonstration project with 1,284 male prisoners in Idaho found that 48% had no children; the other 668 men reported a total of 1406 children (Farmer, Purdy & Bushfield, 2000). The numbers are alarming, considering that children of prisoners are five times more likely to end up in prison (Mazza, 2002). Increasingly, children of incarcerated parents are becoming a larger share of the foster care population and those children living with grandparents (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002).

The negative impact of fatherlessness on children has been well documented (Popenoe, 1996; Wallerstein, 1998; Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Bushfield,

2000). When father absence is due to imprisonment, there are additional risks. Confinement has been found to reduce post-release opportunities for prisoners, and for their families (Gehring, 2000). There is a cyclical nature to crime and low educational attainment. Adult children of incarcerated parents who are in prison are more likely to have low educational attainment (Harlow, 1997).

The importance of fathers in children's lives is not limited to contact and access; it is the quality of father involvement that is crucial (Parke & Brott, 1999). Children are negatively impacted by the lack of a father role model (Rudel & Hayes, 1990). With the large number of fathers in prison, fatherlessness has become more than a "private agony" (Hewlett & West, 1998, p.173): it is now a very public issue with educational, social, cultural, and economic consequences.

### Literature Review

There is a large body of research supporting the notion that educational intervention has a positive impact on offenders (McKee & Clements, 2000; Jancic, 1998; Jenkins, Steurer & Pendry, 1995; Anderson, Schumacher & Anderson, 1991; Beck & Shipley, 1989). Prison-based education has been hailed as "crime prevention," and having a direct impact on recidivism (Pell, 1994). Clearly, motivation, educational or vocational attainment, and environment all have an influence on post-release success (Jancic, 1998). Anderson, et.al. (1991) identified additional variables of race, history of drug or alcohol abuse, marital status, felony incarceration (not a chronic re-offender), receipt of academic/vocational training while incarcerated, and employment as predictors of successful release.

While parenting education is often seen as an effective tool to improve the quality of family relationships and foster positive outcomes for children, fathers in prison frequently are ignored or excluded from parenting programs. There are good reasons to restrict access to children for some prisoners, such as sexual predators, and those with a history of victimization and exploitation of children. These reasons are challenges to policy makers, prison educators, and families. "In promoting responsible fatherhood among prisoners, it is not necessary to compromise family preferences, to romanticize ideal parent-child relationships that never existed, or to ignore behaviors or contacts likely to be detrimental to children" (Hairston, 1998, p.627). Recognizing the varying needs of fathers in prison and their children may require new approaches. Many fathers in prison share a concern for their children, but may be unable, unwilling, or unprepared to remediate (Hairston, 1998). Prisoners often exhibit an

absence of an internal locus of control, and a failure to empathize with others (Winters, 2000), both key factors in effective parenting skills. Fathers in prison often have a range of different provider and nurturing roles with their different children: those who had resided with them at the time of incarceration, as well as those who did not (Hairston, 1998). It makes sense to address parenting needs of inmates with respect for the varying roles they may fill in the lives of their children.

Parent education has been identified as the single best predictor of positive outcomes in family relationships (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Reaching out to fathers while they are in prison may also strengthen families (Mazza, 2002). There is growing evidence that parent education has some promise for reducing recidivism (Rudel & Hayes, 1990). Post-release success is higher among inmates with stronger family ties (Hairston, 1987). The positive impact of parent training for prisoners has been documented (Mustin, 1984; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998), but the permanency of such changes has not been established. Education programs often assume that attitudes and knowledge are precursors for behavior, so that a change in attitudes is a first step in behavior change in parenting practices (Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999). Difficulties may arise in documenting long-range change, due to time constraints and varying lengths of sentences. Also, correctional institutions do not have a history of collaboration that might support effective parenting programs (Hairston, 1998).

Martinson (1974) identified as one of the four important reasons why nothing works in prison education that programs are often irrelevant to life outside prison. Due to financial constraints and costs associated with prison programming, as well as the debate regarding punishment and rehabilitative models, it is even more important to focus on what works.

Family literacy programs have demonstrated success in encouraging parent-child connections as well as educational attainment, through structured writing, reading, and communication assignments (Geraci, 2000). These programs have found their way into prison education programs. Parenting education, as an aspect of life skills development, is also found in many prison programs. Parenting education could be considered an aspect of restorative justice, which "concentrates on the harms of crime and seeks reparation by involving victims" (Halstead, 1999, p. 42). Assuming that inmates may be capable of benefitting from adversity, imprisonment may offer a "teachable moment" to create purposeful changes in life structure (McMillen, 1999). Teaching inmates to be parents may be the most promising potential for keeping the next generation out of prison (Turner & Peck, 2002). Clearly, there is a need for good outcome

measures and studies that can address parenting changes resulting from such programs.

### Study Population

The North Idaho Correctional Institution's (NICI) Robert Janss School is a 120-180 day, up-front, diversionary "boot camp" program, to which males are sent on retained jurisdiction by the judge. Each inmate is evaluated, and at the end of 120 days, the judge may either place the offender on probation or release jurisdiction and allow the offender to complete the sentence given. NICI was started in 1974, and is operated through the Idaho Department of Corrections (IDOC). Since its opening, NICI has typically released 80% of offenders to probation at the end of their evaluation period. The large numbers of inmates returning to the community, and presumably to their families, make this a particularly desirable population in which to study the impact of parent education. The NICI program emphasizes education, pre-release, life skills, and substance abuse in addition to the discipline of a boot camp routine. Inmates are assigned to programming based on level of need, determined from a comprehensive intake assessment. In Idaho, eight criminogenic risk factors have been identified as useful in determining the level of need: anti-social attitudes, values and beliefs; pro-criminal associates and isolation from pro-social others; particular temperament and behavioral characteristics; weak social and problem solving skills; criminal history; negative family factors; low levels of vocational and educational skills; and substance abuse (IDOC Programs and Education, 2000).

The parenting curriculum used at NICI was developed by prison education staff, and is intended to address some of the "negative family factors" assessed at admission, such as the lack of a suitable father role model and family violence. The curriculum includes four distinct content modules. The first module addresses normal child development from birth through adolescence (brain development, social/emotional development, moral development). The second module introduces concepts about fathering, the importance of fathers in children's lives, and the unique role that fathers play in families. The module also includes content on the impact of father absence and father role models on children. The third module stresses communication skills and positive discipline, responsible parenting, and appropriate discipline for each of the developmental stages. The fourth module focuses on family literacy, reading, and creating a home learning environment that supports educational development and reduces some of the risk factors for children. Inmates attend daily parenting

classes for four weeks, with a variety of teaching and learning strategies used by the instructor. While inmates often request assignment to the parenting program, they are assigned to the class based on an assessment of need. Inmates who report that they are fathers, and who are not known sex offenders or sexual predators, would typically be assigned to the parenting program during their last 30 days of a 120-day stay. Pre-requisites for the class include an ability to understand the reading material, based on educational assessment tests as part of the larger educational program at the prison.

### Methodology

This mixed methods study examined, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact of short term parenting education on fathers in prison who were enrolled in the 30-day parenting class. A simple experimental design was coupled with individual interviews, in attempt to provide a richer description of the imprisoned father's lived experience, and to better understand what it means to be a father in prison. After obtaining appropriate IRB approval, including review by a prisoner advocate, informed consent was obtained. Pre-tests were administered by the researcher on the first day of parenting class, and again on the final day, followed by personal interviews.

The researcher had an interest in exploring the availability of social support to fathers in prison, and selected the Multi-Dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MDSPSS), (Zimet, et.al.,1988) to measure this variable. This instrument assists in determining sources of social support from family, friends, or a significant other, and has excellent reliability, with  $\alpha = .91$ . The inmates' perception of their own father role models was determined, using the Parent Child Relationship Survey (PCRS), (Fine, et.al., 1983). The PCRS has excellent internal consistency, with an overall  $\alpha$  of .96. This instrument is useful in determining levels of role confusion. The meaning that fathers in prison give to the concept "responsible father" was explored, using the Bushfield Responsible Father Questionnaire (BRFQ), (Bushfield, 2000). This instrument seeks to determine the father's construct of "responsibility" as a nurturing or more traditional, disciplinary role. The Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory, second edition, (AAPI-2), developed by Steven Bavolek (1999), was selected due to its sensitivity in measuring attitudes about normal child development, empathy, the use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline, and role reversal. This instrument has test-retest correlations of .76, and excellent content and construct validity. The pre-and post-test format suggested the use of paired t-tests to analyze results, using SPSS-11.0.

Individual interviews followed a structured questionnaire, developed specifically for this study. Interview questions were designed to address the same areas for which structured survey instruments were used, in an attempt to triangulate the methodology and provide a more complete picture of the incarcerated father's experience.

The basic research questions for purposes of this study include:

1. Can short term parenting education programs have an impact on parenting skills? What is the impact?
2. What do prisoners say about their experience as an incarcerated father? What meaning do fathers in prison give to their experience of being a father in prison?
3. Can incarcerated fathers be "responsible" fathers? What does it mean to incarcerated fathers to be responsible?
4. How do father role models and social support influence incarcerated fathers?

The study relies on self-report from the participants, who may wish to present themselves in a positive light to the researcher. No attempt was made to verify comments or responses. While the researcher had no influence on programming or any services received by the participants, the participants were all prisoners and assigned to educational programming as a condition of their imprisonment. This may have an impact on the responses obtained. No attempt was made to observe the teaching of parenting classes. Subjects were drawn from two separate parenting classes, taught by two different teachers using the same curriculum, across two consecutive 30-day periods.

## Results

The 32 male participants in this study were primarily white (80%, N=25), young (M=28.4 years), and serving convictions for drug, burglary/theft crimes (65%, N=21). 18 entered the prison without a high school education (56%). With respect to these demographics, the participants in the parenting study accurately reflect the population at NICI. No attempt is made to suggest that this study population is a representative sample of all fathers in prison. Rather, the study was undertaken in an attempt to better understand the experiences of this group of imprisoned fathers.

The most significant pre- and post-test changes, as noted on the AAPI-2, were in inmate attitudes toward the use of corporal punishment, and in reversing parent/child roles. Scores reflect that, after completing the parenting class, inmates are less inclined to use corporal punishment, and less apt to expect

children to provide emotional care for parents. No significant change in attitudes was noted for the subscales of empathy and child development. (See Table 1).

With respect to their own father role models, incarcerated fathers scored rather low on the PCRS with respect to a positive father role model. The mean score of 3.4 on a scale of 1-7, indicates a rather weak father role model. Surprisingly, incarcerated fathers reported a lack of role confusion about their fathers, with a mean score of 3.72.

Strong social support was noted, primarily from significant others, as reported on the MDSPSS. The instrument asks subjects to respond to items, using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree.) The item "there is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings" received a mean score of 5.78.

The sub-scale indicating social support from friends had a mean score of 4.14, while the sub-scale indicating support from family had a mean score of

**Table 1. Paired t-Test Comparisons of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores on the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory-2**

Items (N=32)	Pre-Test		Post-Test		t value
	M	SD	M	SD	
<i>Use of Corporal Punishment</i>					
• Parents should teach children right from wrong by sometimes using physical punishment.	3.38	1.29	4.19	1.23	-2.46*
• Children are more likely to learn appropriate behavior when they are spanked for misbehaving.	3.69	.92	4.35	1.12	-2.19*
• Children should be forced to respect parental authority.	2.96	1.34	3.69	1.28	-3.23**
<i>Role Reversal</i>					
• Young children should be expected to comfort their mother when she's feeling blue.	2.50	1.27	3.27	1.43	-3.43**
• Young children should be expected to hug their mother when she is sad.	2.42	1.17	2.92	1.41	-1.85*
<i>Empathy</i>	3.15	1.31	3.27	1.45	-.57
<i>Child Development</i>	4.50	.58	4.46	1.10	.16

\*p<.05    \*\*p<.01

5.08. The social support sub-scale for significant others was the highest, with a mean of 5.61.

The BRFQ indicated a strong traditional father role. Imprisoned fathers identify responsibility most often in terms of discipline and financial support: "a responsible father provides regular financial support" (N=19) and "a responsible father provides discipline and serves as a role model" (N=8) were most frequently selected as the most important actions of responsible fathers.

Interviews were transcribed and sorted by thematic similarity. Fathers were asked about how they were able to maintain contact with their children while in prison. They reported that they maintained contact with their children through telephone, letters, and help from family and significant others. Prison policies around phone calls (cost, lack of ability to phone collect, time allowed for phone calls only in the late evening when young children might be asleep) were most often mentioned as preventing contact with children. Inmates also suggested that family members were pivotal: some were helpful in maintaining contact, and others restricted contact.

Interviews with fathers provided a more detailed description of the father and his attitudes and intentions toward parenting. Fathers reported that the primary changes in their attitudes were regarding child development, and the importance of father involvement (being there, teaching, role model, involvement.) This was not reflected, however, in pre-and post-test scores on the sub-scale for child development with the AAPI-2. (See Table 1.)

Fathers in prison articulated most often that what had changed the most for them as fathers in prison was their understanding of how to discipline, and their own thinking processes and attitudes.

Responding to the question about the "ideal father", participants were asked "What should be the father's role with his children?" An analysis of the responses revealed themes of a changing sense of the father's role, and an emerging sense of the importance of the father. These themes are reflected in the following quotes:

"My ideas have really changed on this. You need to be caring and a good role model. A father should be a learning center with a kind, gentle, but firm hand."

"A father should be an example of all the positive aspects in humanity, which is hard. I should be able to pass on my accumulated knowledge and understanding so my child can make better decisions than I did."

"I think the most important thing is to be there, be loving and caring, and give her the support she needs. I will try to spend time with her, and not to spoil her, but to participate in her life."

"I never had a father—the closest thing I had to one hung himself, and then it was up to me to take care of my mom. So it's really hard to know. But I try to be there for them, and try to be there emotionally and financially."

"A father should be willing to give love, attention, and encouragement, as well as teach them to be responsible. It doesn't look so good for me, being in jail. I've been incarcerated many times. But I want to fix what I've missed, and be there for them. That will be new for me."

In the absence of a strong or positive father role model, how do incarcerated fathers learn to be responsible fathers? There were often others who served as more positive role models. Fathers reported other ways of learning, through father-substitutes (step father, grandfather, uncle, brother). The following quotes capture some of the range of imprisoned fathers' experiences with father role models:

"My step dad influenced me. My real dad was violent, but my step dad spent time with me."

"My uncles stepped in. They taught me a lot of things."

"My grandfather helped me. He taught me how to be responsible."

"I haven't ever had a role model. I don't want to be like him. So I guess I'm still learning."

"Not having a father makes me want to be a good father. I don't want my kids to have that pain. I'm not going to be that way."

How does prison change incarcerated fathers? Fathers in this study were reflective on their prison experience. Since all of the participants were approaching the final days of their stay in the present institution, they perhaps were more attuned to this reflective process, as indicated by the following comments:

"I've realized that I can change, that I don't have to be like my father. I have less fear of becoming like my father, and have learned a whole different aspect to discipline. I can discipline without aggression."

"My way of thinking has changed. The way my life was going, this prison time is like a reprieve. It's helping me think of who and where I want to be, who I want to be with. My love for my daughter has really grown."

"My outlook on life is different. For once in my life, I really want to change, not because I have to, but because I want to. I want to be a part of my children's lives."

"For me, I used to do things without thinking. Emotionally, I have changed as a father. I am learning how to care for others instead of just for myself."

"It's very painful to sit here and wonder how your kids are doing, and not being there to see. You might get smarter in here, but you get hurt everyday. Missing your kids is painful."

"Being away from family is worse than being in prison. I'd want people to know that it's really hard, so they need to think before you act."

## Conclusions

Parenting education seems to have an impact on fathers in prison. However, the change indicated through pre- and post-test measurement does not match with the inmates' own report of what has changed. Education and attitude change do not insure behavior change, so further research is needed to explore the lasting impact of such parenting education initiatives.

Prisoners were reflective about their role as fathers while in prison. They report difficulty in maintaining contact, and have a strong sense of "positive self talk" about their motivation to change, or improve. It is unknown if this motivation is sustained after release.

Fathers in prison can identify ways to be responsible while in prison, but are challenged to be responsible from a distance, particularly given their sense of responsibility as a disciplinarian and financial supporter.

Fathers in prison are influenced by negative role models, but often are able to compensate for a lack of a positive role model through social support,

reliance on another caring adult, or through parent education.

The recurring theme of the prisoner's positive self concept and self motivation to be a "responsible father" needs further exploration. Fathers in this study reflected a sense of certainty that they will do the right thing, that they will be a good father, with very little self-doubt. This sense of self-efficacy and motivation to be a "good father" warrants further exploration. It may be helpful for future research to address the problems related to empathy and child development. These seem to be critical components of parent education. Perhaps these components are less amenable to change through classes which do not involve a behavioral component; or perhaps these areas of parenting need more work when inmates return to their families and communities.

If "teaching inmates to be parents may be the most promising potential of keeping the next generation out of prison (Turner, 2002)," then prison education programs may need to pay more attention to parenting curriculum and transition programs that can improve parenting skills.

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### Biographical Sketch

**Dr. Suzanne Bushfield** is a social work educator and researcher with thirty years of experience in various public and private human service agencies. Her research focuses on fathers across the lifespan, including divorced fathers and fathers in prison.

## Correctional Education Historical Vignettes

### Early Records of Learning Disabilities

With the advent of the modern special education movement in the U.S., attention fixed on the needs of the educationally disabled. Perhaps this trend is intensified in juvenile facilities and adult prisons, where recent approximations have four times the incidence of educational disabilities as in the local schools. And with the recent rise in educational disabilities frequency, many observers have the notion that all this is a purely modern trend. However, the literature is full of examples of free lance ancient scribes writing for people with disabilities in the Greco-Roman world. Labels for the disabilities changed over the centuries. A scribe might have written at the end of a client's legal document "I wrote this on his behalf because he does not know letters," or because "he is not a good speller, or "because he writes slowly." In Ptolemaic times, before Rome conquered Egypt, a similar ending was frequently "because he/she is agrammatos" or without grammar (Harris, 1989, p. 141). In 179 AD, 42 of the 64 existing texts by scribes for Roman soldiers assigned to Egypt were written because they were illiterate; the other 22 were because they were "slow writers" (p. 254). Apparently the percent of slow writers increased dramatically as the ancient world went into crisis near the end of the Roman Empire (p. 318).

— Thom Gehring

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