

THE URGENT NEED FOR PRISON PARENTING PROGRAMS

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

### The Urgent Need for Prison Parenting Programs

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Prison parenting programs have only recently been created to address the problems of separation of families and the negative effectives that families and children experience. The crisis of mass incarceration in the United States has created a need for more of these programs. These programs need to be ongoing and available to all incarcerated parents in order to reverse the negative effects of incarceration. Findings from the current programs have shown an increase of parenting skills that is beneficial for the family long after reunion. Research has also shown an increase in academic skills for children, as well as closer relationships developing with the incarcerated parents. The need for prison parenting programs is urgent to address the emotional, psychological, and societal issues that silent victims of families have endured without sufficient assistance.

## **Introduction**

There is currently an urgent need for more and improved parenting programs within prison systems. According to the Bureau of Justice, “there are about 2 million people behind bars in the United States. There are also more than 2 million children in the United States alone that have a parent incarcerated, and some statistics indicate this number could be over 3 million. In 2007, this was estimated to be 1 in 43 children in the United States with a parent in prison (Dennison, Smallbone, Stewart, Freibert, Teague, 2014). Also “as the imprisoned population increases worldwide there is a growing concern for children who have incarcerated parents” (Newman, Fowler, Cashin, 2011). It is only in recent years that more awareness on the negative effects of parental incarceration has come to light. The need for prison parenting programs is due to the crisis of families being separated, oftentimes from the head of the household. This crisis is causing psychological and lifelong problems for children as well as increasing the difficulty for families to be able to adequately reunite and function as a normal family unit. The fact that research is just beginning makes the need for these programs very urgent and a pressing concern for the future outcomes for all families involved especially those of minority group populations. Prison parenting programs have been one way in which the parent and child relationship can be maintained and possibly repaired. “Previous research has found that early attachment quality is an important predictor of children’s later social and emotional functioning” (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper and Shear, 2010). It is this type of research that shows that prison parenting programs,

especially nursery programs, are needed to ensure that children's well-being is not disrupted early in life due to the punishment of their parent. There is another disruption that occurs right after a parent's arrest that causes a need for programs to be implemented especially for the benefit of children. Sharratt (2014) notes that "Immediately after parental imprisonment, children can suffer a sense of abandonment and uncertainty regarding the future

of their relationship with their parent." When there are adequate programs in place, a child can have confidence that although their parent is not present at home in daily life, they are still a vital part of their lives and care about them. Finally, prison parenting programs are needed to remove the negative situations and problems that children of incarcerated parents are experiencing. Current research is consistently finding that parental incarceration negatively affects children in their home and school life as well as being a mental health issue for them. In fact, "children of incarcerated parents are at risk for negative social and academic outcomes, including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, substance abuse, adult offending and incarceration, truancy, and school failure" (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper and Shear, 2010). In addition, Dennison, Smallbone, Stewart, Freibert, Teague (2014) note that "African-American children disproportionately experience parental imprisonment, with one in four young adults estimated to have experienced the imprisonment of their father over the course of their childhood ( Wakefield and Wildeman, 2014)." On the opposing viewpoint, "many onlookers take offense at the thought of young children being imprisoned for their mothers' crimes" (Jbara, 2012). They look at this as a sentence for the children. The true sentence for the children is when they are not given the chance to bond and maintain a

relationship with their parent. The focus then should be on not allowing a child to suffer the consequences of incarceration internally since they are not the one imprisoned. As state and federal governments have allowed the creation of these programs, they “have ultimately concluded that keeping families together outweighs the retributive value of incarceration” (Jbara, 2012).

## **History**

What has caused this enormous rise in prison incarceration that has resulted in the rise of family separation? Uggen, McElrath (2014) suggests that much of it has to do with current sentencing guidelines for crimes and not necessarily that crimes are on the rise. This line of thinking would also suggest that certain populations are being targeted more harshly than other groups for basically committing the same crime. They link this rise with the rise of incarcerated parents. Current statistics obtained from the Pew Charitable Trusts estimate that “1 in every 28 children (3.6 percent) has a parent incarcerated, up from 1 in 125 just 25 years ago” (Uggen, McElrath, 2014). To look at a history of how incarceration in the United States has affected families, in particular the African-American family, it is crucial to take a look at changes that took place during the 1970’s a political response to crime. After Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s Family Assistance plan to help the African-American family did not make it past a senate vote, new alternatives were devised (Coates, 2015). This was also at a time when progress was being made in the Civil Rights Movement for black people as a whole. A startling climb in rates of mass incarceration began in the 1970’s. Coates (2015) notes that “From the mid-1970’s to the mid-80’s, America’s incarceration rate doubled, from about 150 people per 100,000 to about 300 per 100,000. From the mid mid-80’s to the mid-90’s, it doubled again. By 2007, it had reached a historic high of 767 people per 100,000, before registering a modest decline to 707 people per 100,000 in 2012. In absolute terms, America’s prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from

some 300,000 people to 2.2 million.” The way these numbers translate into affecting the African-American family is further described. For instance, “In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated-10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers” (Coates, 2015). Coates describes these statistics as America’s solution to a social program that was needed for low income minority families. Mandatory sentencing guidelines were touted as the new way to reduce crime. The impact had virtually little to no effect on reducing crime, but did result in people being incarcerated for longer times away from their families. This incarceration wave was largely due to the rise in drug arrests. What is interesting about this pattern however was that although all findings and research came to the same conclusion that black people compared to white people actually used drugs at equal rates, “by the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prison was a more common experience for young black men than college graduation or military service” (Coates, 2015). This was a start to the breakdown of these families for current and future generations. A large portion of these parents were also not necessarily absentee parents prior to their incarceration. This can often be the assumption and the conclusion is that this is not really a crisis because the children were being cared for prior by a relative or another custodial parent. However, statistics show that incarcerated parents were either residing with their children and families or regularly involved in their lives. Uggen and McElrath (2014) note that “ A full 42% of incarcerated fathers and 60% of mothers lived with their children prior to incarceration, and another 40% of nonresident, ever-incarcerated fathers had regular visitation with their children.” This further shows the need for contact to be

continued between families so as not to cause disturbances in this relationship and lifelong problems since children of incarcerated parents become innocent victims and can have declines in academic performance and social behavior as a result of this event. In addition Meek (2007) notes that “nearly half of all prisoners lose contact with their families whilst in prison.” It is for this reason that programs need to be developed and applied to prevent this disconnect. The maintenance of the family relationship has been shown to help the prisoners as well as the family unit.



### **Prison Nurseries**

A term was defined in 1979 by Bronfenbrenner called the “child’s microsystem, or the activities, roles and relationships experienced by the child” (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, Shear, 2010). This term is used as a basis to show what relationships that are present within this “microsystem” are necessary for a child’s positive development. Furthermore, these relationships can be seen as a foundation for how a child responds to future life challenges as is explained in the following statement,

“Children’s attachment relationships and contact with parents are considered part of the child’s microsystem. Previous research has found that early attachment quality is an important predictor of children’s later social and emotional functioning. A child who has developed a secure attachment derives comfort from contact with the attachment figure when distressing or threatening situations arise and uses the attachment figure as a base from which to explore the environment with increasing confidence over time. In contrast, insecure and especially disorganized, attachments are considered risk factors for emerging psychopathology” (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, Shear, 2010).

This is why prison parenting programs such as nurseries are so important because the very first attachment relationship with the mother can have lifelong consequences whether positive or negative. There are states that do allow women to have their children remain with them while incarcerated based on evidence showing the benefit “to the child’s cognitive and emotional development” (Jbara, 2012). Jbara (2012) notes that “The American Psychological Society found that infants who bond securely with their

mothers became more self-reliant and have higher self-esteem as toddlers. Later in life, this translates into successful peer relationships and the ability to better cope with life stressors.” Now one could argue that a child would be fine if only temporarily separated from their mother due to a short prison sentence and then remain with them for years after since they are not aware of what is going on at this time. It has been found, however that “Some mothers may reunite with their children early on, when the child is two or three, and before the child would have any established memories of the mother’s absence. Even in those situations, the child can develop long-lasting psychological trauma, largely because “an attachment bond is formed when the child is between the ages of six months and two years” (Jbara, 2012).

Due to the rising incarceration of mothers and more evidence just cited about the impacts of separation, “eight states now offer prison nurseries, all but one of which have opened in the past two decades; Wyoming recently finished constructing a facility that will bring the total to nine” (Yager, 2015). The oldest prison nursery which has been a model for others is the one contained in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Westchester County, New York. This is the place that New York State’s pregnant prisoners go to and also houses the state’s prison nursery (Wertheimer, 2005). Wertheimer (2005) notes the key focuses of the program which are that “pregnant inmates are given prenatal care and parenting classes. Their babies are born at a hospital nearby. Afterwards, some women are allowed to keep their newborns with them for up to 18 months in a special part of the prison.” This time frame is actually the standard for most programs as “Inmates who qualify can raise their babies for a limited time-ranging from one month to three years, but in most states 18 months-in separate housing units on prison grounds” (Yager, 2015).

There have been successful results from this program and now “Dr. Mary Byrne of Columbia University is conducting the first-ever clinical research trials on the success of the nursery program at Bedford Hills” (Wertheimer, 2005). So far she has found that “All of the babies reach their developmental milestones at least during that first year of life that we’re studying them inside the prison. So the babies do as well as babies in any other setting. They are not challenged at all in any negative way. They’re exactly where they should be” (Wertheimer, 2005). In addition, Wertheimer, (2005) says that “Dr. Byrne’s preliminary data indicate that one year out of prison most mothers and babies are still together.” This is in line with the original goal of the program to “create a bond between mothers and their newborns to give the baby a better start and the mother incentive to stay straight” (Wertheimer, 2005). These findings are also consistent with another study that Dr. Byrne’s led as well as a prior study done years before by psychoanalyst Rene Spitz. Spitz’s study was done in 1945 using a “16-mm camera to film two groups of babies and toddlers-one being raised by their mothers in the nursery of a penal institution for delinquent girls, and the other by the staff of a foundling home, a shelter for abandoned youth” (Yager, 2015). The findings were very dramatic in the different outcomes between the children.

### **Prison Nursery**

Children under 1 year

Speaking some words  
talk, eat

### **Foundling home**

Children 18-30 months old

Needed assistant to walk,

Very mobile on their own  
facility

¼ died from disease outbreak in clean

(Yager, 2015).

With all conditions being basically the same, Spitz concluded that “The most significant difference? The “nursery provides each child with a mother to the nth degree,” he concluded, “a mother who gives the child everything a good mother does and beyond that, everything else she has” (Yager, 2015). This study was done 10 years prior to Byrne’s study on mothers at Bedford Hills but confirms the same necessity for this relationship. Byrne’s study “followed 100 children and their mothers as they went through the nursery program in New York and reentered their communities. (The study participants were drawn from Bedford Hills and a neighboring medium-security facility where the New York corrections department had opened a second nursery program in 1990”( Yager, 2015). The results showed that “children who stayed the longest in the nursery had the best outcomes” (Yager, 2015). Furthermore this type of program is so promising since “experts say that babies who form secure attachments to their mother early on may be better even if they are later split up” (Yager, 2015). This is significant in continuing these programs and expanding them even for mothers who have lengthy sentences because the initial bonding can be so impactful for the children and in the long run make for a healthy parenting relationship. In addition, “Mothers who stay with their young children while in prison have lower rates of recidivism, potentially because of a stronger sense of attachment to their families” (Jbara, 2012). A program that aims to further these successes is Washington’s Residential Parenting program where children can stay in the prison for up to three years (Jbara, 2012). This program “employs a

number of other unique services, including doulas to help the women during their pregnancy and labor, and the Early Head Start program, which ensures that the children develop normally, eat nutritious food, and receive adequate cognitive stimulation” (Jbara, 2012). Further steps like these help stop the cycle of disruption of the parent child relationship as well as helping to prevent many of the negative outcomes that begin to be exhibited right after a parent’s incarceration.

### **Parent-Child Relationship**

The parent-child relationship is necessary for the well-being of a child at all ages and “The existing literature highlights that parental imprisonment has detrimental consequences for children’s mental health and the strength of parent-child relationships” (Sharratt, 2014). The research shows that when there is a good relationship this can not only benefit the child’s development but also help to ease the transition when a parent is first incarcerated. This is also necessary due to the ongoing loss the child initially faces and has to deal with. “It is known that children who have an incarcerated parent are at risk of developing poor health outcomes” (Newman, Fowler, Cashin, 2011). In addition, “These children can suffer from disruptive, delinquent, and/or social behavioral problems,” in addition to feelings of “guilt; emotional withdrawal; depression; low self-esteem; and embarrassment’ among others” (Jbara, 2012). However studies have been done to show how these effects can be reversed. For example a study of 4-15 year olds and their caregivers who had a father and/or a mother in a Wisconsin prison found that “Children who had contact with their incarcerated parents reported fewer feelings of alienation toward that parent compared with children who had contact (visits, calls, letters not differentiated); contact not related to children’s behavior problems” (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, Shear, 2010). Another study that included mothers and caregivers with children from 13 to 19 years of age where the mother was in a Virginia state prison found that “More frequent contact (visits, calls, letters not differentiated with incarcerated mothers associated with less child school drop outs and suspensions” Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, Shear, 2010).

### **Reading Programs**

Another direction of prison parenting programs to benefit children and the parenting relationship is reading programs. The logic of this type of parenting is that “by making schoolwork, rather than the parents’ incarceration, the focus of parent-child contacts, an obvious point of awkwardness and discomfort can be avoided during their interactions” (Blumberg, Griffin, 2013). A more important reason is that “One way for children to feel accepted and cared about by their parents is for the parents to show concern for and to participate in the children’s educational activities” (Blumberg, Griffin, 2013). One such program is based in the Florida correctional system with incarcerated mothers. It provides a “14 week parent education course and weekly 1-hour live video chat sessions with their children. During the session, the mothers read age-appropriate books to their children” (Blumberg, Griffin, 2013). Another similar program is the Aunt Mary’s Storybook Project in Illinois. “According to Bartlett (2000), “these programs help reassure children that they have not been abandoned and that their mothers love them” (Blumberg, Griffin, 2013). Finally, Blumberg and Griffin (2013) identify a reading program that now spans 15 county jails, state jails, federal prisons and 3 juvenile facilities that were based in San Diego County California. Originally it was called Family Connections and is now Reading Legacies. The goal of this program is to “benefit children of incarcerated parents by mailing home DVS and new books which, “provides healthy parent-child interactions at a time when this may be impossible in any other way” (Blumberg, Griffin, 2013). These type of programs overall are targeting the needs of the children to have a healthy and ongoing relationship with their incarcerated

parent and for the parent to be able to fulfill their parental roles in some capacity. This ultimately strengthens the relationship during the time of incarceration and afterwards. A program called Breaking Barriers with Books has identified these needs and has been successful in facilitating these relationships. The relationship is maintained through a book share program along with journal writing. The program actually provides “fathers with an opportunity to be more self-directed, active parents, while encouraging the child’s exposure to good literature and reading through book sharing” (Genisio, 1996). The resulting benefits are lasting memories and more of an “intimate” experience than just a quick visit. A similar program that began as a pilot project has further showed the need to give incarcerated parents back their role as a parent to positively their self-esteem as well as being a bridge for a better child and overall family relationship. This program started in the Minnesota prison system and is called Reading is Fundamental or RIF. The program allows prisoners to send books to their children in hopes “that the children will get hooked on reading, thereby reducing their chances of following in their parent’s footsteps” (Estrada, 2005). Prisoners also participate in creating books and sending them to their children. It is programs like these that lessen the impact of the separation and can make a huge difference in the outcome of a family’s generation.



### **Contact Visits**

The actual contact visits themselves have proved to be a type of parenting program that has been the basic application of parenting skills from the prisoners. “When in-person visits provide meaningful interactions among family members, they can be a significant benefit for incarcerated parents and their families. For example, high quality in-person visits are associated with decreased offender parenting distress and increased parenting skills as well as improved family relationships and child adjustment” (Beckmeyer, Arditti, 2014).

These family visits can provide a situation where parents can actually interact with their children and family and feel very effective in their contributions. All institutions provide some type of visiting arrangement however there is considerable room for improvement to make the environments more family friendly. The majority of visitation situations are often limited by space, often noisy and many times also have physical barriers such as phone and window separation allowing only minimal interactions. A program was studied to strengthen family relationships that consisted of 4 correctional institutions in a Midwestern state involving 69 incarcerated parents. The program consisted of visits with less guidelines and limitations that included education for the parents. One finding from the research of this program was “quality not “quantity” of the visitation was more significant for maintaining close relationships rather than the amount of visits themselves even if they were frequent (Beckmeyer, Arditti, 2014). Parenting stress was also found to decrease as well as the inmates’ feeling more involved in their children’s rearing. In addition Meek (2007) noted that the chances of going back to prison decreased up to six times when family contact is maintained. When a group of 75 men were provided a

parenting course in an England prison, the overall consensus was that “the best form of parenting support they could receive whilst in prison was helping with maintaining contact with their children and families” (Meek, 2007).

## **Benefits**

Due to these programs just being started in recent years there is not enough data to provide concrete evidence of success. There are however many evaluations that are showing benefits for the inmates, children and overall recidivism. “For example, Thompson and Harm (2000) found significant improvements in participants’ self-esteem and child expectations, corporal punishment and family roles among incarcerated mothers. Furthermore, parent education programs in prison have also been found to increase knowledge of child development and non-violent approaches to child behavior management (Showers, 1993)” (Wilson, Gonzalez, Romero, Henry, and Cerbana, 2010). In addition, “inmates who maintain family bonds while incarcerated have lower recidivism rates than those who do not maintain such bonds. Thus, parent education is beneficial not only in the sense that these programs teach positive parenting practices and help to strengthen family bonds, but also because there is a potential for these programs to reduce recidivism rates” (Wilson, Gonzalez, Romero, Henry and Cerbana, 2010). This is also at a time where funding is needed to continue these programs so research is ongoing. Even though there are numerous costs associated with creating and operating prison parenting programs, the costs can actually be lower than what is already being incurred in the criminal justice system. For example, “In reality, the cost of running a prison nursery is often only a fraction of the typical taxpayer burden for supporting these children because ‘public funding provides the bulk of economic support for this population of children of incarcerated parents whether inside or outside of prison nursery programs’” (Jbara, 2012). This is because Jbara (2012) provides the statistics that approximately 10% of children are in foster care and 90% of those children come under a

family member's care that receives public assistance. Finally since, "Recidivism rates for mothers are lower when the mother has an established relationship with her child, and, furthermore, children with a maternal bond are less likely to become offenders themselves. Therefore, in the long run, the prison population will shrink, reducing the financial burden. More immediately, society will benefit from having a larger population of law-abiding and comparatively stable citizens" (Jbara, 2012). There are successful testimonials from participants such as this one about a reading program:

"He was very happy to see his father and was talking and waving to him. He is happy now because he's been asking about him. My son is learning how to read, and he was following along page by page, listening to him read. Such a great program for kids and a good way to see our missed family member. (Mother of a 6-year-old whose father is incarcerated)"

(Blumberg, Griffin, 2013).

Additionally, the prison systems themselves are seeing the benefits with the parenting relationship as well as with the inmates themselves and that is why programs are being replicated. Newman, Fowler, and Cashin (2011) show 11 studies that look at the effectiveness of parenting programs. These programs "ranged from 1 to 24 weeks, and varied from 1 session per week to entire days, with complete programs ranging from 5 to 72 hours. Programs were educational based, with topics focusing on child development, communication and play skills, child safety, and effective discipline" (Newman, Fowler, Cashin, 2011). In all of the studies there were positive results and increases in knowledge. In five of the studies there were "increases in parenting

knowledge” (Newman, Fowler, Cashin, 2011). Findings also showed a greater understanding of children from the inmates and improved parenting. Although there may be issues of incorporating programs into different institutions, “Besides providing emotional or social support and possible financial assistance, parental education is a suitable intervention that should be thoroughly explored” (Newman, Fowler, Cashin, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the current prison parenting programs are a great start to addressing the needs of the ever increasing population of incarcerated parents and their children but there is a great need for expansion. The breakdown of the parent child relationship during parental incarceration should not be allowed to continue due to the documented and ongoing research that shows detrimental effects on children that affect their lives during this situation and many years after. Prison parenting programs are needed to reverse and stop future emotional disturbances that children of the incarcerated may face and to keep intact the bond between parent and child. These programs can allow for a smooth transition for prisoner and child to continue with their relationship despite a negative circumstance and allow this relationship to only grow stronger when the incarceration has ended. The overall process will significantly benefit the individual relationships as well as society as a whole when negative outcomes are eliminated that would otherwise require mental health, social welfare agencies, and educational institutions to be involved.

## **Modern Day**

By Qiana Jackson

Slavery's not dead, no slavery's not dead.

Whoever put that silly little idea up in your head?

It just went from slave owners to CEOs.

From chain gangs to assembly lines.

From plantation to cells.

From arbitrary to law.

No slavery's not dead, slavery's not dead.

I wonder who put that silly idea up in your head.

Overseer to cop.

From whippings to injustice at a traffic stop.

At a traffic stop?

Hidden lynchings or legal, to videotaped chokings.

Sanctioned by law.

Prisons built to keep a modern day monopoly going, on the backs of those...

Who may not be picking cotton or sharecropping, but labor free so the Vp can

say,

Oh boy, what a good day!

From snatched away families, to short visits and calls.

To a generation with no hope.

Where they say am “Am I hired?” and the answer is

Nope!

Slavery’s not dead, no slavery’s not dead.

Don’t let anyone make you keep that silly idea in your head.



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