

THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY STRENGTHENING GRANTS FOR INCARCERATED AND REENTERING FATHERS AND THEIR PARTNERS



Parenting from Prison: Innovative Programs to Support Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers

Rising numbers of children are affected by the incarceration of a parent. As of 2006, an estimated 7,476,500 children had a parent who was incarcerated or under correctional supervision, and the number of children with an incarcerated father increased 77% from 1991 to 2004 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Families affected by parental incarceration face many challenges: separation, stigmatization, disruption in the home environment, and the loss of family income. These challenges have been associated with negative outcomes for children, including poor parental bonding, internalizing and externalizing disorders, and low school achievement (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001).

Despite the increasing number of families affected by incarceration, few correctional facilities provide family strengthening programs (Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005). In fact, only about 10% of fathers in state prison report participating in a parenting class (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). This gap represents a lost opportunity to intervene with at-risk families to improve family functioning, particularly during the critical period before reentry.

Research on the effectiveness of parenting programs for incarcerated and reentering men is encouraging: participants report improved perceptions of the importance of fatherhood, increased parenting skills, and more frequent contact with their children (Harrison, 1997; Robbers, 2005; Skarupski et al., 2003). Other lines of research highlight the importance of father involvement for child well-being. In

About This Research Brief

This brief describes implementation findings from the evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). It documents innovative parenting supports provided to incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families.

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general, children with involved fathers are less likely to drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol, commit crimes, and become teenage parents (Mbwana, Terzian, & Moore, 2009). When fathers do not reside in the home, the quality of the co-parenting relationship and financial support from the father are still critical for positive child outcomes (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). Most incarcerated fathers will be released back into the community, typically after serving 4 years or more in prison (Mumola, 2000), and research suggests that positive family relationships reduce the risk of recidivism (Visher & Travis, 2003). Thus, these fathers need skills and opportunity to establish positive contact with their children and co-parents during incarceration and to improve their chances for healthy family functioning upon release.

A New Approach: The Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners

This brief describes efforts of the national MFS-IP initiative to build collaborations between the criminal justice system and human service agencies to provide family support services to incarcerated fathers, their children, and their co-parents. These grants fund efforts to strengthen father-child bonds through parenting, co-parenting, and relationship-building classes; child-friendly visitation; communication support; and auxiliary services. Eleven of the 12 MFS-IP grants provide parenting as well as couple support.

Grantees combine established approaches to parenting skills training with innovative efforts to improve relationships between co-parents and increase father-child contact during incarceration. Recognizing the importance of material stability for successful parenting, many programs also work to address their participants' vocational, financial, and housing needs through education, case management, and job placement assistance. Participation in all programs is voluntary. Furthermore, in the interest of protecting children and preventing domestic violence, many programs impose exclusion criteria that limit the participation of fathers convicted of sex offenses or child abuse, or of those subject to protective orders prohibiting contact with their co-parents or children.

We draw on data from a **national implementation evaluation** of these grantees, including site visits and interviews with key stakeholders from the MFS-IP programs during Years 1 to 3 of program delivery. We also present preliminary, descriptive data from baseline interviews with incarcerated fathers and co-parents involved in a **multisite, longitudinal impact study**. While programs funded under this mechanism will continue serving families through September 2011, this brief describes their efforts through Year 3 of the grant period (ending September 2009).

What Do Fathers Need to Know? Curriculum Choices for Parenting Skills

Parenting program content must be perceived as salient and relevant for fathers to stay engaged. Grantees selected a wide variety of parenting curricula for use with the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated fathers they served; however, the curricula generally included a core set of common topics, such as

- the importance of father involvement,
- communication with children and other family members,
- child development,
- discipline techniques, and
- anger management.

One of the greatest challenges MFS-IP grantees encountered was identifying parenting skills curricula that addressed the unique issues shaping parenting for men involved in the correctional system. Most MFS-IP grantees used commercially available parenting courses that were not specifically developed for use with a justice-involved population. Grantees using such curricula often made modifications to ensure sensitivity to issues of incarcerated men. For instance, the **New Jersey Department of Corrections** adapted *Active Parenting Now* for use in joint classes with incarcerated fathers and their co-parents. Based on the psychological theories of Alfred Adler, the course emphasizes the importance of encouragement and authoritative (as opposed to autocratic or permissive) parenting. It is aimed at cultivating children’s self-esteem, cooperation, and responsibility; topics include recognizing the goals of behavior, natural and logical consequences, family meetings, power struggles and problem-solving skills, encouragement, and stimulating independence. The **Council on Crime and Justice** (Minnesota) developed an adapted version of *Families in Focus*—a curriculum designed to support positive social and behavioral development among children identified as high risk—for use with incarcerated fathers and their families.

Some grantees implemented commercially available curricula without making major adaptations. *24/7 Dads*, used by the **Indiana Department of Correction** and the **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee), aims to help men develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills they need to get and stay involved with their children. Key topics include handling and expressing emotion, masculinity, and discipline. The program also guides men through the process of evaluating their own parenting skills and fathering role models. *Love and Logic*, chosen by the **Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency** (Michigan) for use with men on community supervision and their partners, trains parents in techniques to set clear limits, help children learn from their mistakes, and share control by offering small choices.

Two grantees chose curricula specifically designed for incarcerated fathers. *InsideOut Dad* is a fatherhood reentry program used by the **Maryland Department of Human Resources** and the **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee) to connect incarcerated fathers with their families in preparation for release. Topics include emotional self-management, communication, and fathering while incarcerated. *Long Distance Dads*, taught in state prisons by **Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota**, assists incarcerated men in becoming more involved and supportive fathers. Adaptable to a variety of institutional time schedules, the curriculum focuses on universal aspects of fatherhood as well as unique challenges facing incarcerated fathers, such as fulfilling parenting responsibilities while confined, parenting upon release, and understanding the effects of incarceration on families.

Finally, four grantees implemented original, in-house parenting curricula as part of their MFS-IP-funded work. **Keeping FAITH**, developed by the **RIDGE Project** (Ohio) founders, focuses on teaching men how to father from inside prison. Special topics include giving advice to children without being controlling and coping with children who have difficulty communicating. **Back to the Family**, developed by **Centerforce** (California) and **APPLE FamilyWorks** with extensive input from incarcerated fathers, includes modules on child development, communication styles, co-parenting relationships, and rebuilding trust with children and their caregivers. **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire**, working in close partnership with the **New Hampshire Department of Corrections**, designed **Fathers Connecting with Children** to meet the specific needs of fathers within 2 years of release. The course guides participants in working through a set of parenting scenarios designed to prepare them for reuniting with their children. The **Osborne Association** (New York) collaborated with incarcerated fathers and academic experts in the field of incarceration and parenting to create its 16-week **Basic Parenting** curriculum, which supports men in parenting effectively from prison regardless of the length of their incarceration.

Not Just a Lecture: Course Delivery Strategies for Parenting Skills

The MFS-IP grantees needed to design programming to suit the institutional and interpersonal contexts shaping incarcerated men’s relationships with their children. Many grantees chose institution- and community-based course formats that enabled joint or concurrent class participation by incarcerated fathers and their co-parents (*Exhibit 1*).

Although staff used curricula to structure their courses, additional strategies proved crucial for engaging participants. Instructors at many sites guided participants in relating the ideas to their own lives—first by exploring their childhood experiences with their fathers and then by considering how these experiences have shaped their skills and goals as parents themselves. Facilitator instruction was often combined with slides, videos, worksheets, and group discussion.

Some programs incorporated other participatory activities such as stories, games, or role playing to further encourage engagement. Staff and a participant who were interviewed as part of the implementation study suggested that group parenting classes in which students shared openly about the ways they were applying course content in their family relationships enabled motivated participants to begin transforming their attitudes toward their lives. Such formats

Evaluating Parenting Curriculum Effectiveness

The effectiveness of parent education curricula remains an empirical question. To date, few experimental or quasi-experimental studies have examined parenting outcomes among participants in such classes. Most evaluations have used single-group or unmatched comparison group designs, which compare participants’ questionnaire responses before and after a parenting course. These studies measure whether parenting knowledge improved, but do not allow any conclusions to be drawn regarding whether gains in knowledge were due to participation in the course, whether such gains were sustained, or whether the knowledge gains were associated with improvements in parenting behavior.

Active Parenting Now, used by the **New Jersey Department of Corrections**, represents an exception. In a quasi-experimental study, participants in the program demonstrated higher family cohesion, less family conflict, and higher self-esteem relative to a comparison group of nonparticipants (Abbey, Pilgrim, Hendrickson, & Buresh, 2000; Abbey, Pilgrim, Hendrickson, & Lorenz, 1998). The curriculum was accorded “evidence-based” status by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

gave men the opportunity to hear themselves and their classmates repeatedly articulate new ways of thinking about family relationships, while building connections with other incarcerated men who shared the goal of changing their parenting.

Instructor reputation, personality, and ability to relate to class enrollees affected participation. Interviewees at several sites emphasized the powerful influence of familiarity with and trust in the course instructor. At some sites, it was also seen as preferable for the instructor to have overcome parenting challenges similar to the ones faced by the students, or to be perceived as outside of the prison authority structure. Some sites, including **Centerforce** (California), **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire/New Hampshire Department of Corrections**, and the **Osborne Association** (New York), helped to address this need by recruiting peer educators to assist in delivering or even developing their parenting curricula. These educators, typically incarcerated fathers who had graduated from a prior course and been trained as peer leaders, served as role models and helped participants apply the course content to their own lives.

Family Context: The Importance of the Co-parent

Parenting programs serving incarcerated fathers encounter the reality that children's mothers (or caregivers) often serve as gatekeepers, mediating contact between fathers and children.

Poehlmann (2005) found that the quality of relationships between incarcerated parents and their children's caregivers exerted a strong influence on frequency of parent-child contact.

Addressing such co-parenting relationships is important because research has shown that co-parenting marked by high cooperation and low conflict is associated with greater relationship quality and stability between parents and with better child outcomes (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Thus, to be effective, parenting supports for incarcerated men need to address the co-parenting relationship.

One unique aspect of MSF-IP programs is their strong focus on co-parenting. In addition to some grantees involving the co-parent in parenting skills components, all grantees offered family strengthening and relationship-building services that involved a co-parent or a committed romantic partner with whom the father shared parenting responsibility. Such services included relationship and family counseling, support groups, relationship education, mentoring and coaching services, family case management, and domestic violence education. Moreover, many grantees offered holistic services to increase the likelihood of successful reentry, including financial and vocational skills training and substance abuse treatment (see *Exhibit 1*).

While program staff had little trouble engaging eligible men in parenting-related programming, they faced many challenges in recruiting the co-parents of their incarcerated male participants. Several approaches proved effective in engaging co-parents in participating in the classes, either jointly or separately, including:

- contacting co-parents persistently and through multiple means;
- emphasizing to each co-parent how participation could benefit the couple's child or children; and
- providing participation supports to co-parents, such as transportation assistance (e.g., gas cards), child care, and meals.

Exhibit 1. Family Strengthening Services Provided by MFS Grantees to Enhance Relationship Quality and Family Environment

| Grantee | Parenting Education | Other Parenting Services and Supports |
|---|--|--|
| Centerforce, California | Curriculum: <i>Back to the Family</i> (offered in fathers-only and joint formats) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family case management • Family skills mentoring/coaching |
| Child and Family Services of New Hampshire | Curricula: <i>Fathers Connecting with Children, Long Distance Dads</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family reentry planning • Video visiting |
| Indiana Department of Correction | Curriculum: <i>24/7 Dad</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education |
| Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota | Curriculum: <i>Long Distance Dads</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family case management • Domestic violence education • Video diaries |
| Maryland Department of Human Resources | Curriculum: <i>InsideOut Dad</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Domestic violence education • Support groups • Case management • Employment assistance |
| Council on Crime and Justice, Minnesota | Curriculum: <i>Families in Focus</i> (offered to fathers and co-parents separately) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family case management • Support groups • Relationship and family counseling • Financial skills building • Employment assistance • Housing placement assistance |
| New Jersey Department of Corrections | Curriculum: <i>Active Parenting Now</i> (offered jointly to fathers and co-parents) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family case management • Financial skills building • Substance abuse treatment |
| Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency, Michigan | Curricula: <i>Caring for My Family</i> (offered to fathers only) and <i>Love and Logic</i> (offered jointly to fathers and co-parents) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Support groups • Family reunification planning • Case management • Crisis intervention |
| Osborne Association, New York | Curriculum: <i>Basic Parenting</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Relationship and family counseling • Family skills mentoring/coaching |
| Shelby County Division of Corrections, Tennessee | Curriculum: <i>InsideOut Dad</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Family group conferencing • Domestic violence education • Financial skills building • Employment assistance • Case management |
| The RIDGE Project, Ohio | Curriculum: <i>Keeping FAITH</i> (offered to fathers only) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship education • Support groups • Family skills mentoring/coaching |

In some cases, grantees leveraged the popularity of men-only parenting classes as a “gateway” to engage men and their partners in other services oriented toward relationship strengthening and family support. Staff from **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire/New**

Hampshire Department of Corrections noted that incarcerated men who might otherwise be resistant to family programs were often drawn to participate in parenting classes. After instructors established trust and rapport with fathers, they succeeded in introducing men to the idea of improving their co-parenting relationships. Once engaged, participants reported particular interest in course material related to parent-to-parent communication and co-parenting with former romantic partners. Staff believed that men were strongly motivated by the desire to improve their communication skills for the ultimate benefit of their children. Service providers at other MFS-IP sites speculated that approaching fathers and partners early in the father’s incarceration term, when family relationships might still be relatively intact, also eased recruitment.

From Classroom to Contact: Facilitating Father-Child Visitation

In addition to classroom-based parenting education, many MFS-IP programs supported parents’ direct involvement with their children. Separation is a central challenge for children of incarcerated fathers, who are typically away from the confined parent much longer than children of incarcerated mothers (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Researchers have proposed that quality and frequency of parent-child contact during the incarceration might moderate negative child outcomes (Arditti, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Poehlmann, 2005). Initial findings suggest greater compliance with child support post-release, lower parenting stress, and more adaptive child behavior after visitation between a child and an incarcerated father (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998).

Still, incarcerated fathers appear less likely than incarcerated mothers to maintain contact with their children (Hairston, Rollin, & Jo, 2004). An analysis by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that 30% of fathers incarcerated in state prisons had some form of contact with their children every week (most often by mail), whereas 22% had never had any contact with their children during their incarceration. Fifty-nine percent of fathers in state prisons reported that they had never had a personal visit with their children during their incarceration (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Likewise, Day, Acock, Bahr, and Arditti (2005) estimated that two-thirds of fathers never participated in a personal visit with their children while incarcerated.

Fathers in the MFS-IP longitudinal impact study report various types and degrees of contact with their children. *Exhibit 2* describes preliminary frequencies of personal visits, telephone calls, and mail communication. These statistics are based on baseline data from 548 incarcerated fathers and their 548 spouses or committed partners, representing 35.2% of the total couples whom researchers plan to recruit during 3 years of baseline enrollment. The majority of fathers did report contact with their children through mail and telephone, although most did not receive visitation. Frequency of current contact varied widely by study site, particularly for personal visits: for example, 20% of

Exhibit 2. Frequency of Father-Child Contact Among Participants in the MFS Impact Study

| | Father Report | Co-parent Report |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Ever talks on the phone with child | 75% | 74% |
| Ever sends mail to child | 84% | 81% |
| Ever receives mail from child | 67% | 70% |
| Ever receives photos of child | 93% | 88% |
| Ever receives personal visits from child | 62% | 64% |

incarcerated fathers in Minnesota reported receiving personal visits from their children, compared with 71% of fathers in New York. Research documents numerous barriers to parent-child contact during incarceration, including transportation issues and distance to the prison, caregiver work schedules, the high cost of telephone calls, and unfriendly visitation practices at correctional facilities (Hairston, 2001). In our study, the top barriers to contact reported by fathers were that the distance to the prison (or other transportation issues) made it difficult for the children’s caregivers to bring them for visits, and telephone calls were too expensive or telephone access was lacking.

As discussed below, MFS-IP staff helped participants to navigate successful visitation with their children by providing logistical support, offering enhanced visitation venues for families, and guiding parents in structured parent-child activities. Such program components were intended to facilitate visitation and to improve the atmosphere in which fathers and children interacted.

Visitation Support

Families seeking to maintain contact during a father’s incarceration encounter bureaucratic and practical challenges. First, they must comply with all correctional facility requirements governing child visitation. For the incarcerated parent, this typically includes requesting that the child and caregiver be added to approved visitor logs as well as avoiding personal disciplinary violations. For the visiting co-parent, this includes submitting all visitor documentation required for admittance and passing background checks (sometimes impossible for partners or co-parents with a criminal history). Second, families must make logistical arrangements for the visit, including planning a trip during approved visiting hours, arranging transportation, securing child care for any nonvisiting children, and obtaining food and other supplies for travel and time at the correctional facility. To assist with these challenges, MFS-IP grantees have implemented several innovative strategies. For example, MFS-IP–funded case managers working in the **New Jersey Department of Corrections** supported parents in navigating the hurdles that might otherwise prevent them from bringing children for visits with their fathers. Case managers worked individually with each family, contacting co-parents or caregivers to help them make arrangements for visitation and to assist them in obtaining and submitting the documentation required by facilities in order to bring a child for visitation. Other grantees, such as the **Council on Crime and Justice** (Minnesota) and the **RIDGE Project** (Ohio), supported visitation by defraying the cost of prison visits for children and their caregivers.

Defraying the Cost of Visitation: The RIDGE Project (Defiance, OH)

The **RIDGE Project** offered visitation support to its participants as a way of rewarding attendance at parenting and relationship education classes and encouraging family communication and contact. The program reimbursed co-parents who participated in family strengthening services for transportation and food expenses associated with prison visitation, up to a maximum of \$50 per co-parent.

Child-Friendly Settings

Staff at various grantee agencies asserted that the creation of special visitation areas facilitated easier, less strained interactions between incarcerated parents and their children. Unlike traditional prison visitation areas, child-friendly visitation centers may be furnished with toys, child-sized furniture, and playful, inviting décor. Efforts to create such centers can be hindered by facility policies and regulations: driven by security needs, correctional administrators typically restrict which areas of the facilities can accommodate visits and what kinds of activities are allowable. To build successful visitation programs, grantees worked closely with

facility staff to address these security concerns and identify available space. Unlike other program components that required scheduled use of a shared space, child-friendly visitation required the identification and alteration of a dedicated space within the facility to be used solely for that purpose. For this reason, the successful start-up of a child-friendly visitation component typically required extensive facility buy-in. Parenting programs run from within the correctional system or by nonprofit agencies with very strong, long-term relationships with the correctional system were more likely to successfully create and manage such operations, including the **Osborne Association** (New York), **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire/New Hampshire Department of Corrections**, and the **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee). Such extensive efforts were not always necessary, however, to take small steps toward comfortable accommodations for children. For example, the **New Jersey Department of Corrections** helped make it possible for co-parents to bring their children with them to facility-based parenting classes by obtaining children’s books and coloring supplies for the rooms in which courses were conducted.

Structured Visitation Activities

Three MFS-IP programs, the **Osborne Association** (New York), **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire/New Hampshire Department of Corrections**, and the **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee), used parent-child visitation as an opportunity to actively support participants in cultivating new parenting skills. These semi-structured efforts included providing family meals, marking holidays and birthdays with special activities, conducting joint skills-building activities with fathers and children, and devoting parts of visitation time to group conversations or games. In addition, the **Osborne Association** hired graduates of their correctional facility-based parenting classes to staff their child-friendly visitation areas. These men served as informal mentors, available to answer questions from other fathers or visiting children and to encourage positive parent-child interaction.

Supporting Parenting Skills in Action: The Osborne Association (Brooklyn, NY)

The **Osborne Association** worked with correctional facility administrators to establish Children’s Centers at several New York State prisons. At these specially equipped centers, parents and children could participate together in skills-building sessions. The 15–30 minute semi-structured sessions offered by Osborne allowed fathers to practice the parenting skills they learned in the agency’s parenting course, interact directly with their children, and receive feedback and parenting support from experienced fathers.

The **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee) reported combining one-on-one and group activities for fathers and their children with concurrent activities for co-parents or caregivers (see schedule at right).

Families were invited to participate in these special visits

approximately once a week from the time the family enrolled in programming until the father's release. In addition to these semi-structured activities, the program offered each family up to two family group conferencing sessions facilitated by a program staff member. During these highly structured sessions, incarcerated participants could meet with significant family members such as their parents, spouses or romantic

partners, and co-parents of their children to discuss expectations, fears, and hopes related to reentry, according to a predetermined list of important life domains. Implemented by other grantees in slightly different formats (including long-distance videoconference), these structured conversations provided an opportunity for families to overcome fears, generate realistic expectations, and plan collaboratively for a successful return to the community.

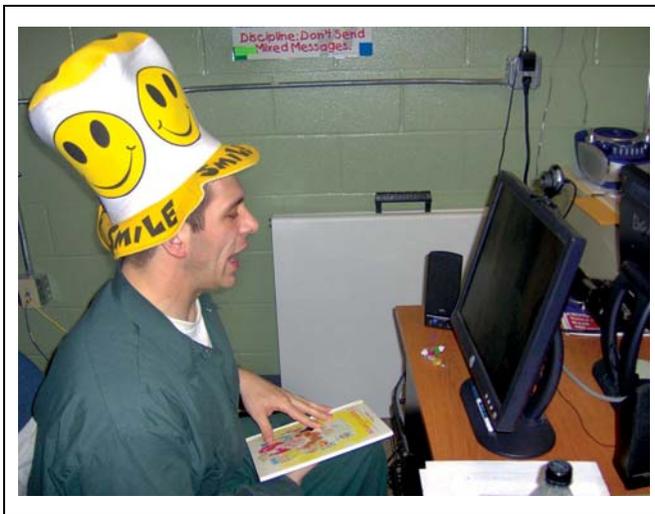
Involving Co-parents and Caregivers: Shelby County Division of Corrections (Memphis, TN)

A typical child-friendly visit lasted up to three hours and included the following activities for fathers, children, and co-parents in the prison's dedicated child-friendly visitation area:

- A 30-minute dinner provided by the program for fathers, co-parents, and their children;
- An optional relationship education class offered jointly to fathers and co-parents, during which visiting children engaged in supervised play activities with program staff; and
- Up to 90 minutes of father-child visitation, during which co-parents participated in activities in an adjacent room, such as guest lectures on domestic violence and literacy from community advocates.

Getting Creative: Innovative Supports for Father-Child Relationships

In addition to supporting in-person contact, programs undertook a host of other creative strategies to help families supplement in-person visits and increase the level of connectedness between fathers and their children. These included components of programming offered to



participants, as well as special incentives to participation. **Child and Family Services of New Hampshire/New Hampshire Department of Corrections** offered video visiting, encouraging all fathers who completed the prerequisite parenting course to participate. Families could participate in these visits from their homes or, for those without high-speed Internet capabilities, from one of several satellite offices located throughout the state. In addition, the program offered fathers the chance to create storybook audiotapes for their children. Fathers recorded stories and other positive messages on the tapes, which were

sent home to their children. In a similar effort, **Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota** partnered with the education division of the South Dakota Department of Corrections to give fathers enrolled in relationship education classes the opportunity to create video diaries for their children. Men were provided with a free or subsidized DVD and the chance to record

themselves doing something special for their children, such as reading a book, reading a letter, or playing a musical instrument. The DVDs were then mailed home to participants' children.

The **RIDGE Project** (Ohio) encouraged letter-writing and telephone communication by providing its participants with subsidized telephone calls and letter-writing supplies. The **Shelby County Division of Corrections** (Tennessee) provided child-oriented incentives to encourage caregiver participation in its family strengthening program. Participating co-parents received a \$10 gas card to defray the costs of each child-friendly visit in which they participated. Those who completed the relationship education course received a \$50 school uniform voucher for their children.

Summary: New Perspectives on Parenting Support for Incarcerated Fathers and Their Families

Families involved in the criminal justice system face overwhelming challenges. Yet research suggests that these families can benefit from additional support (Hairston, 1988, 1991). Directing resources toward programmatic and policy initiatives that support vulnerable families during incarceration and through reentry offers a potentially powerful strategy for reducing recidivism (Visher & Travis, 2003) and possibly generational effects attributable to incarceration (Roettger, 2009).

This brief highlights approaches to supporting incarcerated and reentering fathers in strengthening their parenting and co-parenting relationships. MFS-IP grantees employed varied and comprehensive strategies, including parenting skills training, relationship building and co-parenting support, child-friendly visitation, enhanced communication (e.g., video diaries, letter writing), and auxiliary services including case management and vocational training. They aimed not just to increase father-child contact but to improve the long-term quality of family relationships by teaching skills important for family functioning and providing opportunities to practice these skills. Although numerous barriers exist, grantees were able to successfully implement these services, and a rigorous evaluation is currently underway to assess their effectiveness. This evaluation will help to identify relationship-strengthening strategies that can be successfully delivered within the constraints of the correctional system; assess the effectiveness of such programs on family functioning, relationship quality and stability, and recidivism; and make recommendations for how these programs can be integrated and sustained with the correctional system.

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National Evaluation of MFS-IP Programs

Funded by the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), the National Evaluation of Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners is focused on exploring the effectiveness of relationship and family-strengthening programming in correctional settings.

Implementation Study: Yearly implementation interviews will be conducted with each grantee through 2010. As programs mature and more incarcerated participants are released, grantees will gain more experience serving couples during and after release. The implementation evaluation will document insights garnered from grantee efforts to provide post-release supports in the community and navigate couples-based service provision during a period of major relationship transition.

Impact Study: Survey data collection with incarcerated men and their partners is currently under way in 5 impact sites selected from among the 12 grantees. Beginning in December 2008, couples participating in MFS-IP programming and a set of similar couples not participating in programming were enrolled in the national impact study and completed the first of three longitudinal surveys designed to collect information about relationship quality, family stability, and reentry outcomes. Baseline data collection is expected to continue on a rolling basis for a total of 3 years, with follow-up data collection extending another 18 months beyond the final baseline interview.

This brief and other publications related to the MFS-IP evaluation are available from the HHS ASPE website: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/index.htm>. A program overview and evaluation summary, as well as links to publications of interest and other web resources, may be found at the national evaluation website, <https://mfs.rti.org>.

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