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A Model of Parenting Programs

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A MODEL OF PARENTING PROGRAMS

By Christine Beatriz, Donna M. Zucker and Kathryn Callahan

Colleges of nursing have long expressed that their mission is to serve the community. Correctional facilities provide great community placement opportunities for nursing and other students, and the rewards of such experiences are reciprocal. Opportunities to teach, learn and provide health care are plentiful in such environments, and these things can only be done when the facility also embraces a philosophy of rehabilitation, working toward community integration for their inmates' release. Among the many life skills and personal development programs available at the Hampshire Sheriff's Office Jail and House of Correction (HSO) in Northampton, Massachusetts, are parenting programs and classes for incarcerated fathers and custodial parents, begun in 2007. In 2013, student nurses worked with HSO to teach and learn from the many parenting classes and opportunities offered. With a strong emphasis on reentry, three unique parenting programs — led by the community outreach coordinator, who is a master's-prepared nurse educator — were put in place.

FIRST PARENTING PROGRAM

The first of the parenting programs consists of weekly classes lasting one hour each. The program is 15 weeks long, with room for flexibility, and is completed when all curriculum topics have been covered. There are 22 topics included in the current curriculum. These topics

include understanding types of families and styles of parenting, stress, anger, problem solving and critical thinking. With regard to parenting a child, the curriculum also includes topics about communication, problem behaviors, discipline and limits, reward, and responsibility. In addition, conflict resolution, values, empathy and forgiveness, as well as sessions on safety and health issues, are important topics for discussion.

The format of the current program is mainly one that utilizes a single instructor with a secondary instructor helping facilitate discussions. A major method of teaching is through group learning and the sharing of personal experiences with parenting, both during childhood and as a parent. One of the strengths of this method is its collaboration and support between participants who are interested in listening to one another and giving feedback.

Family Focus

The Family Focus Program grew out of the need for custodial caregivers, and others who need help, to get more information about healthy parenting. Workshops are offered weekly. The Family Focus Program serves people related or connected to those in custody who will be returning to family and the community. These individuals, who have common life challenges, meet together to help themselves and each other by sharing experiences, thoughts, ideas, frustrations, successes and hopes. The purpose is to learn from each other's struggles and successes and to build more support for each inmate and their families. It is believed with education and new skills, incarcerated men can reduce their risk of continued abusive behavior and promote family bonding. One major goal is to prevent relapse by the inmate or a return to incarceration. Another goal is to help family members with many issues that may arise as they assist the individual in his or her return to family and community.

Connecting With Your Child

The third program is called Connecting With Your Child (CWYC). In this program, held once a month in the visiting room, incarcerated men can invite their children to participate in activities for the evening. A unique CWYC component is its focus on building these parent-child relationships. Individuals who bring children to events sit together at a table in the back of the visiting room. This allows for unimpeded father-child bonding. CWYC has been very successful thus far, and both the parents and children enjoy time with dad.

CWYC works to make visits a positive experience for both father and child. Men are educated and prepared in advance to make them more comfortable leading and participating in a variety of programs developed to meet goals and objectives of the State Board of Education. The programs are also a lot of fun. Through this program, fathers see that with a little preparation, encounters with their children can be much richer, more meaningful and more fun for everyone. Some of the fathers have never played with blocks, blown bubbles, painted a pumpkin, made Valentine's Day cards, painted Easter eggs, participated in an "egg hunt," planted seeds or seen a magician perform in person. They are now able to do these for the first time with their own children. Through education and mentoring, fathers are able to learn to get down on the ground and play with their child in a thoughtful, cooperative and lasting way.

Improving family relationships and decreasing violent tendencies are essential components of good parenting programs. They are evidence-based and facilitated by trained professionals utilizing teachers, nurses, caseworkers and social workers who assist with the educational curriculum for the fathers. In addition, community members even volunteer and actively participate in these father-child programs.

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Eye on Literacy

The fourth program is the Eye on Literacy program, offered once a month. Many fathers and their children are exposed to the joys of reading as well as a significant bonding experience. Research recommends that children's reading proficiency be achieved by the end of the third grade, a critical step on the way to graduation. Fathers are encouraged to begin to read with their child right after they are born. Reading also encourages confidence and a bonding relationship between fathers and children. The foundation of reading starts from the very moment a child first hears sounds of people talking, tunes of sounds, rhythms, and repetition of rhymes and

stories. Lasting joy is found in not what the fathers get from this program, but in the time they give to their children. Reading promotes close relationships and enhanced communication in their lives. A positive predictor for a father's continued success in bonding with his child after release is visits from the children during incarceration.

WHY THEY MATTER

These parenting programs aim to improve family relationships. Essential components of good parenting programs are the commitment of trained professionals such as teachers, nurses, caseworkers, social workers, volunteers and students. The curriculum teaches positive parenting skills and techniques. Best practices include a family focus along with a curriculum that not only crosses generations (from grandparent to parent to child), but also extends to the community during incarceration and after release. The at-risk child-parent relationship has qualities such as impairment in family communication, family functioning and parental stress. Teaching and parenting support by nurses is often welcomed and needed by parents. These four parenting programs at HSO address these qualities and are aimed at increasing contact between children and their incarcerated parent and to help family members cope.

TEACHING AND PARENTING SUPPORT BY NURSES IS OFTEN WELCOMED AND NEEDED BY PARENTS.

RESOURCES

A variety of resources are available for parents and families during periods of incarceration. The only prison-specific parenting program is Parenting Inside Out. This program's website has several resources for children and curricula for jails, prisons and the community.[1] A second resource is the Oregon Model of Parent Management Training. While it is not corrections-focused, it is an excellent resource to prevent and intervene in cases of externalizing behavior in children. The program provides interventions for parents to improve their parenting skills.[2]

Positive Parenting Program, also known as Triple P, is a program that was developed in Australia but has programs worldwide. It aims at modifying the family environment to change problem behaviors of children. This five-level program moves from general to specific prevention strategies for children's behavioral concerns.[3]

ENDNOTES

[1] Parenting Inside Out. (2013). *Welcome to Parenting Inside Out: Prioritizing, parenting and protecting our children.* Retrieved from www.parentinginsideout.org/welcome-to-parenting-inside-out

[2] Implementation Sciences International Incorporated. (2011). *Parenting management training — The Oregon model.* Retrieved from www.isii.net/2011SITEFILES/aboutpmto.html

[3] Triple P. (2014). *The system explained.* Retrieved from www.triplep.net/glo-en/the-triple-p-system-at-work/the-system-explained

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