Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Parents
Current Research and Future Directions

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Increases in the number of incarcerated parents have led to the implementation of parent training programs in prisons. Although many programs exist, programs differ in their design and methods of self-assessment. This article examines the current state of research on parenting interventions, including the types of programs available, the outcomes measured in each study, and the overall effectiveness of parent training. Variables that may affect program effectiveness, such as sentence length, educational level, and parent gender, are considered. The importance of primary prevention through parent training is discussed, including implications for social welfare and further scientific inquiry.

**Keywords:** incarcerated mothers and fathers; prison parenting education; incarcerated parents

During the past decade, a growing number of Americans have been incarcerated. In 2002, more than 2 million inmates were held in American jails or prisons (P. M. Harrison & Beck, 2003), representing a 28% increase since 1995. Parallel to this trend has been an increase in the number of children with parents in prison. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of minor children with a parent in a state or federal prison increased by 60%, representing a total of approximately 1.5 million children with at least one parent in prison during 1999 (Mumola, 2000).

Women, in particular, have shown a steep increase in incarcerations and consequent separation from minor children. During 2002 alone, the number of female prisoners increased by nearly 5%, double the rate of increase for male offenders (P. M. Harrison & Beck, 2003). As mothers are very likely to have been the primary—often sole—caregiver for their children, the impact of incarceration on children is particularly acute. In a recent survey of incarcerated parents, nearly all fathers (89.6%) reported that at least one of their minor children was living with the other parent, in contrast to only 28.0% of incarcerated mothers, who were more likely to report their children as living with grandparents or other relatives (Mumola, 2000). Mumola also noted that approximately 10.0% of the female inmates in state prisons reported having children in foster care, in contrast to 1.8% of the male inmates.

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To help improve relationships between this growing population of incarcerated parents and their children, prisons have implemented education programs designed to teach inmates how to promote healthy interactions with their children. These efforts have included: parenting classes, programs allowing children and parents to live together at prison while receiving support and consultation, relationship-building visitation activities, parent counseling, and postrelease assistance. The Family and Corrections Network (www.fcnetwork.org) lists numerous organizations that provide extensive support for families affected by incarceration.

Recent research supports the potential benefits to incarcerated parents and their families of focusing on inmates’ parental roles. Several investigations have documented the negative impact of parental separation on children (Luke, 2002; Meyers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999; Trice & Brewster, 2004). Trice and Brewster (2004) found that adolescents with mothers in prison were 4 times more likely to drop out of school than a cohort of friends without incarcerated mothers. They also noted an association between reduced mother-child contact and the increased likelihood of school suspension.

Children of incarcerated parents are themselves at increased risk for future incarceration. In an investigation of incarcerated juveniles in Virginia between 1993 and 1998, McGarvey and Waite (1998) found that 21% of boys and 17% of girls had a history of paternal incarceration, and that approximately 8% of both boys and girls had a history of maternal incarceration. Reed and Reed (1997) point to the impact of this intergenerational trend on communities of color, where high incarceration rates among families can lead to a normalization of the prison experience and expectations among youth that time in prison is a typical milestone.

The constellation of problems seen in children of incarcerated parents may make them particularly resistant to intervention. Dalley (1997) surveyed mothers at three Montana correctional facilities and the attorneys representing their children’s legal rights. Results indicated high levels of problems that often mirrored those of their inmate mothers. Many of the children had experienced separation from their mothers before the current imprisonment, often because of maternal substance abuse. A large number of the children experienced mental and physical health problems and exhibited a range of problems such as aggressive behavior, tantrums, and frequent crying. Approximately one third of the associated children had school problems including inattention and learning disabilities. Most of the problems of inmate children were evident before incarceration, which undermines a conclusion that prison separation directly causes negative child outcomes. More likely, the significant number of problems among mothers before incarceration, including drug abuse, personality dysregulation, and mental illness, can lead to poor outcomes for children. Many of these children, already at risk prior to separation, experience new stress with maternal incarceration. The cumulative risks and stressors increase the likelihood of continued emotional and behavioral problems that may lead to the child’s own eventual incarceration.
Stress related to parenting in prison is also associated with poor inmate adjustment. Houck and Loper (2002) queried 362 inmate mothers on the degree to which they experienced parenting stress, as measured by a modification of the Abidin (1995) Parenting Stress Index. Results indicated that inmate mothers with higher levels of parenting stress were more likely to report higher levels of depression and anxiety. In addition, higher levels of reported parenting stress were associated with increased frequency of institutional infractions, suggesting that mothers experiencing parenting stress had greater difficulty adjusting to the rules and constraints of prison life. Several studies have conducted in-depth interviews with mothers concerning their experiences in prison. For example, on interviewing 52 women in a minimum-security, prerelease correctional facility, Coll, Surrey, Buccio-Notaro, and Molla (1998) documented the significant amount of stress and pain that can be directly attributed to child separation experiences. They noted difficulties that many women experienced with the loss of daily contact with their children, given the centrality of motherhood to the inmates’ identities. Similar recurrent themes of stress and loss have been reported in other studies that used in-depth prisoner interviews (Enos, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Forsyth, 2003).

Given these trends, a large number of correctional facilities have become interested in providing interventions for incarcerated parents. Responses to inmate parenting needs, however, have been characterized by tremendous variability among prison parent-training programs. For example, some programs differ by targeting specific parent populations within the institution (i.e., parents of young children). Providers of the parenting programs may also vary and include educational staff, mental health staff, volunteers from religious or community groups, or even inmates themselves. In addition, programs may differ in their level of financial and institutional support. The prison’s security level may also limit the range of training and inmate contact opportunities, with fewer options available at high-security institutions. In a questionnaire mailed to state facilities in the United States, Clement (1993) collected information concerning various ongoing programs. Results illustrated that although parenting programs were frequently offered at various institutions, there was no obvious consistency among programs in terms of length, depth, or content. Furthermore, most classes tended to be taught by volunteers with varying levels of expertise in parent training.

With the increase in inmate population and number of children and parents separated, there is a growing need for effective services. The purpose of this article is to examine peer-reviewed articles that describe specific parent-training interventions for prison inmates. Selected articles include qualitative or quantitative information about the effectiveness of the intervention. A literature search for potentially appropriate programs was conducted in scientific journal databases, which resulted in the selection of 17 studies that met the above criteria. Our goals are to describe interventions, identify commonalities among programs, discern which practices are most effective, and highlight unanswered questions related to optimal prison parent-training interventions.
We do not claim that this list is exhaustive and assume that there may be appropriate but unpublished interventions that have not been included. However, we believe that the included studies adequately represent the available range of options for parent training.

**Parent Training Interventions for Prisoners**

Most prison programming for parents has the overarching goal of improving outcomes for inmates and their children, both during and after incarceration. Despite having similar goals, parenting programs differ significantly in design, execution, and method of assessment. Typical parenting curricula include education regarding effective parenting techniques and child development; other components may include enhanced visiting, parental rights training, nursery programs, or support groups. Table 1 provides a description of parenting programs and their methods for self-assessment.

Evaluation of parenting programs provides researchers with information regarding the effectiveness of their curricula. Many studies, however, do not have sufficiently large sample sizes, use random assignment of participants, use control groups for comparison, or use pre- and posttests to examine the effects of the intervention. As a result of their non- or quasiexperimental designs, most of the studies cannot support conclusions regarding program effectiveness.

In the majority of studies, the criterion for effectiveness is a measure that is only indirectly related to parenting. This is largely because of the pragmatic difficulties of assessing inmate-child relationships. Parents have limited opportunities to implement knowledge gained from parenting programs, necessitating the use of measures that examine theoretical constructs instead of direct parenting behaviors. There may be significant obstacles for researchers who seek access to children of inmates (e.g., difficulty obtaining consent from a parent, caregiver, or custodial agency, distance to child’s residence, and institutional concerns about research activities during visitation). As a result, most measures of program efficacy are based on constructs related to inmates’ adjustment as incarcerated parents. Typically, researchers have examined one or more of the following constructs: self-esteem, parenting attitudes, and institutional adjustment.

**Self-Esteem**

Several researchers have used positive changes in inmate self-esteem as a criterion measure for program effectiveness (D. H. Browne, 1989; Harm, Thompson, & Chambers, 1998; K. Harrison, 1997; Kennon, 2003; Moore & Clement, 1998; Thompson & Harm, 2000). The most frequently used measure is the 25-item Index of Self-Esteem (Hudson, 1982). Although some studies have shown an increase in self-esteem at posttest (D. H. Browne, 1989; Kennon, 2003), others have found no significant changes (K. Harrison, 1997; Moore & Clement, 1998). Still other studies have

(text continues on p. 416)
Table 1
Examinations of Prisoner Parenting Programs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Participantsa</th>
<th>Program Description</th>
<th>Research Design</th>
<th>Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block and Potthast (1998)</td>
<td>16 female inmates and daughters</td>
<td>Girl Scouts Beyond Bars developed ongoing troops for inmates and daughters. Program included enhanced-visit “troop meetings” at the prison. Program provided transportation for daughters to these visits.</td>
<td>Hudson (1982) Parent-Child Contentment Scale at pre- and posttest</td>
<td>Qualitative results indicated increased visiting and improvements in parent-child relationship after participation. No significant differences in means of Hudson Parent-Child Contentment Scale over time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. H. Browne (1989)</td>
<td>29 females residing in structured community treatment program used as alternative to incarceration</td>
<td>Class met twice a week for 6 months. Focused on children's needs, emotional involvement, development of individual personalities within a family setting, and self-esteem.</td>
<td>Pre- and posttest using AAPP and SEI</td>
<td>Significant differences on SEI self-esteem construct.</td>
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<td>Boudin (1998)</td>
<td>10 female inmates</td>
<td>Inmates met 5 days a week for 3 months. Focused on mothers' own traumatic experiences, shame and guilt about choices, and grief at separation from children.</td>
<td>No measures included</td>
<td>Qualitative results concerning parenting difficulties.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carlson (2001)</td>
<td>37 female inmates residing in prison nursery</td>
<td>Inmates participated in parenting classes while caring for child in nursery program during 18 months.</td>
<td>Institutional records, follow-up survey</td>
<td>Reduced misconduct and recidivism by participants. Positive attitude endorsed on survey.</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gat (2000)</td>
<td>16 female inmates in parenting class, 5 in nursery and parenting class, 4 in control group, record review of 117 recidivist mothers</td>
<td>Inmates participated in Mother/Offspring Life Development (MOLD) parenting program.</td>
<td>IPPA, IRI, PROM-R recidivism records</td>
<td>No significant differences among inmates on measures or recidivism rates.</td>
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<td>Harm, Thompson, and Chambers (1998)</td>
<td>104 female inmates</td>
<td>Inmates participated in 15-week program based on Bavolek and Comstock’s (1985) Nurturing Parent curriculum.</td>
<td>AAPI and ISEg at pre- and posttest interviews</td>
<td>Women with frequent use of drugs or alcohol showed significant improvement on ISE at posttest. Women with histories of victimization showed significantly lower ISE scores at both pre- and posttest than did nonvictimized participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K. Harrison (1997)</td>
<td>30 male inmates, divided into experimental and control groups</td>
<td>Experimental group met 3 times a week for 6 weeks. Received training in child development, behavior management, family relationships, and communication. Control group watched tapes and participated in discussions. Children were mailed a questionnaire.</td>
<td>Fathers: AAPI and ISE at pre- and posttest; children: Self-Perception Profile for Children</td>
<td>Improvement in fathers’ attitudes on the AAPI. No significant differences on ISE or Self-Perception Profile for Children. (Note: control group received alternate parenting intervention.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Outcome Measures</td>
<td>Findings</td>
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<td>Kennon (2003)</td>
<td>66 female inmates</td>
<td>Class met for 12 sessions. Targeted self-esteem, communication, legal knowledge, and parenting attitudes.</td>
<td>SES, PARQ, Incarcerated Parent Legal questionnaire, communication questionnaire, program satisfaction survey</td>
<td>Increases in positive parenting attitudes, self-esteem, and legal knowledge. No increase in amount of communication between mothers and children.</td>
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<td>Landreth and Lobaugh (1998)</td>
<td>16 male inmates in experimental group, 16 in control group</td>
<td>Inmates received 10-week training in filial therapy (play therapy). Play therapy sessions with inmates and children.</td>
<td>Inmates: PPAS, PSI, FPC; children: Joseph Preschool and Primary Self Concept Scale</td>
<td>Fathers in experimental group scored significantly higher than did controls on PPAS at posttest. Experimental group showed significantly lower parenting stress on the PSI than did controls at posttest. Children in experimental group showed a significant increase in self-concept at posttest.</td>
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<td>Marsh (1983)</td>
<td>Three families of incarcerated fathers (10 children total)</td>
<td>Both parents attended training on communication and child management.</td>
<td>Pre- and posttest 1-hour home observations of family, behavior reports, communication checklist, Adjective Checklist</td>
<td>Qualitative results indicating better father-child communication skills at posttest and improved child behavior.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Moore and Clement</td>
<td>20 female inmates in experimental group, 20 in waitlist control group</td>
<td>Mothers Inside Loving Kids (MILK) parenting group and enhanced visiting.</td>
<td>ISE, AAPI, Nurturing Quiz</td>
<td>No differences between groups.</td>
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<td>(1998)</td>
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<td>Showers</td>
<td>203 females inmates in experimental group, 275 in control group</td>
<td>Class met 1.5 hours per week for 10 weeks. Used modified STEP program.</td>
<td>Pre- and posttest behavior management questionnaire</td>
<td>Significant increase on behavior management questionnaire for experimental group at posttest.</td>
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<td>(1993)</td>
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<td>Snyder-Joy and Carlo</td>
<td>31 female inmates in visitation program, 27 in waitlist control group</td>
<td>Visitation experiences enhanced with volunteers providing special activities and child-friendly visitation area.</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Treatment group reported more letters received from children and more frequent child-focused communication with family and fellow inmates. No significant differences in perceptions of child’s well-being or expressed concerns about child.</td>
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<td>(1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thompson and Harm</td>
<td>104 female inmates</td>
<td>Inmates participated in 15-week program based on Bavolek and Comstock’s (1985) Nurturing Parent curriculum.</td>
<td>AAPI and ISE at pre- and posttest</td>
<td>ISE for mothers who had at least some visits from children or frequent letters improved significantly. Significant improvements for the total group on the AAPI were found in the areas of expectations, belief in corporal punishment, and parent-child roles.</td>
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Wilczak & Markstrom (99)  42 male inmates, divided into experimental and control groups

Class met for 8 sessions in 3 weeks. Used modified STEP program.

Content test, Parent Locus of Control, CGPSS

Experimental group showed significant improvement in knowledge, content test, Parent Performance subscale of the CGPSS, and Locus of Control.

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a. Unless otherwise noted, all participants are prison inmates.
b. Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984).
d. Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).
e. Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980).
g. Index of Self-Esteem (Hudson, 1982).
h. Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965).
k. Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995).
l. Filial Problem Checklist (Horner, 1974).
found that additional variables such as substance abuse history, prior victimization, and frequency of inmate-child contact mediate changes in self-esteem (Harm et al., 1998; Thompson & Harm, 2000). Those interventions that showed positive changes in self-esteem (D. H. Browne, 1989; Kennon, 2003; Thompson & Harm, 2000) did not have control groups for comparison. The two studies that did not see changes used experimental and control groups (K. Harrison, 1997; Moore & Clement, 1998) but did not use random group assignment and had relatively small sample sizes. Overall, there is limited support for a connection between participation in a parenting program and increased self-esteem. Experimental designs with larger sample sizes are needed to further assess this possibility. If self-esteem is to be a typical outcome measure for parenting interventions, it bears noting that studies have not yet examined whether an increase in inmate self-esteem produces improved parenting or improved confidence in one’s parenting, whether good or bad.

**Parenting Attitudes**

Inmates’ parenting attitudes are important areas of intervention for parenting curricula. Specifically, beliefs regarding affection, discipline, and family roles can have repercussions for children’s psychological development. Furthermore, primary prevention through the alteration of parenting attitudes is a politically viable method of intervention because of its potential cost-saving benefits. For this reason, interventions that produce research related to parenting attitudes may be more relevant to policy makers than programs that mainly target inmate self-esteem.

Many studies of parenting programs include measures to examine changes in parenting attitudes before and after participation in a program (D. H. Browne, 1989; Gat, 2000; Harm et al., 1998; K. Harrison, 1997; Kennon, 2003; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998; Moore & Clement, 1998; Showers, 1993; Thompson & Harm, 2000; Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999). Several scales have been used to measure changes in parenting attitudes, most frequently the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (Bavolek, 1984). Other scales include the Porter Parental Acceptance Scale (Porter, 1954), the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1995), the Child Behavior Management Survey (Showers, 1993), and the Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985). Some parenting programs have developed their own content measures to evaluate inmate retention of psychoeducational material.

Some studies using measures of parenting attitudes have found positive results, with participants showing significant improvement at posttest (K. Harrison, 1997; Kennon, 2003; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998; Thompson & Harm, 2000). Others (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998; Showers, 1993; Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999) have shown positive and significant differences between experimental and control group members; however, these groups were not randomly assigned. Those studies that did not show changes at posttest or between groups (D. H. Browne, 1989; Gat, 2000; Moore & Clement, 1998) had relatively small sample sizes. Given the group differences seen in Showers’s (1993) large sample and in smaller samples where effects would be harder
to detect (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998; Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999), current evidence suggests that parenting attitudes do improve with intervention. Experimental designs in future studies can further illuminate this possibility.

### Institutional Adjustment

Poorer institutional adjustment has been shown to be related to parenting stress (Houck & Loper, 2002), suggesting that inmate behavior may improve if parenting stress decreases. Using institutional records, Carlson (2001) found reduced misconduct and recidivism of parenting program participants. In a study that also used institutional records, however, Gat (2000) did not find any significant differences in recidivism between participating inmates and controls. McKeown (1993) observed that mothers who participated in an extended visit intervention were less likely to seek medical treatment in institution facilities. These studies add important information that is often easily obtainable and of value when assessing the institutional merits of parenting interventions. Parents who are less stressed regarding their children may be better citizens of the institutions and thus more amenable to rehabilitative efforts. Future studies may wish to assess how other informal indicators of incarceration adjustment may be affected by parenting stress and intervention. These areas of adjustment may include relationships with other inmates, coping strategies (e.g., smoking, meditation), undetected rule breaking, and vocational or educational functioning.

### Qualitative and Relational Measures

Many studies of parenting programs have described qualitative improvements in participants’ relationships with their children (Boudin, 1998; Eddy, Powell, Szubka, McCool, & Kuntz, 2001; Marsh, 1983; McKeown, 1993; Snyder-Joy & Carlo, 1998). Several of these studies offer rich descriptions of inmates’ experiences as parents in prison that can be used to further develop parenting interventions. Block and Potthast’s (1998) study uses pretests, posttests, and delayed posttests to assess relationship satisfaction and visitation patterns. Their work suggests that women who participate in structured programming with their daughters receive more visits than matched non-participant mothers, but conventional statistical support for this finding is not provided. Block and Potthast’s study would be further enhanced by a larger sample size, random selection of eligible participants, and comparisons of relationship satisfaction with a control group.

Because one goal of parenting interventions is to improve family relations, it is important to assess how interventions may affect children of parents who have received such training. Landreth and Lobaugh (1998) provide encouraging initial evidence. After their 10-week filial therapy parent training with incarcerated fathers, they observed an improvement in the self-concepts of the participants’ children. Block and Potthast (1998) describe qualitative evidence that daughters’ self-perceptions and grades improved after participation in a visitation program. In contrast, K. Harrison (1997)
observed changes in parenting attitudes that were not accompanied by measured changes in child self-perceptions. It is possible that the relatively short time frame for K. Harrison’s intervention (6 weeks) was insufficient for the detection of generalized effects on children. Clearly, more emphasis on measuring the short- and long-term indirect effects of parenting training on the children of inmates is needed.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The most remarkable feature of the literature on optimal parenting training for prisoners is its paucity. Despite the fact that there are more than 700,000 parents in prison (Mumola, 2000), there are only a handful of published studies of parent training, and there is very little uniformity among methods. Some of the studies provide rich qualitative information (Block & Potthast, 1998; Boudin, 1998; Eddy et al., 2001; Marsh, 1983; McKeown, 1993), but complementary follow-up quantitative studies are rare. The variables chosen to measure effects most frequently focus on changes among parents rather than children. Although this focus is an essential initial achievement for such programs, the impact of improved parenting skills on family relationships ultimately needs to be evaluated. Interventions that include child measures (K. Harrison, 1997; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998) provide important information about these effects.

Several studies detected an improvement in inmates’ self-esteem (D. H. Browne, 1989; Harm et al., 1998; Thompson & Harm, 2000). With the exception of D. H. Browne’s study (1989), parent training was also associated with improved attitudes toward parenting (Harm et al., 1998; K. Harrison, 1997; Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998; Showers, 1993; Thompson & Harm, 2000; Wilczak & Markstrom, 1999). Given the generally poor mental health and familial experiences of inmates (Beck & Maruschak, 2001; Ditton, 1999; Warren et al., 2002), these findings are important. However, more focus on the ultimate goal of such training (i.e., improved family relationships) is an essential next step.

In part because of the scarcity of studies of parenting interventions with prisoners, there are many unanswered questions concerning the optimal nature of training for incarcerated parents. Broadly, these questions include: (a) In what ways should parenting-training programs be distinguished from those designed for nonincarcerated populations? (b) Can a uniform prison-specific intervention meet the diverse needs of an incarcerated population? and (c) Are there conditions where parenting training is contraindicated?

What, If Any, Should Be the Unique Features in Prison Parenting Training?

Several of the reviewed interventions emphasize the need for parents to understand the developmental needs of children, form meaningful attachments to their children,
and employ appropriate child-management techniques (e.g., K. Harrison, 1997; Kennon, 2003; Showers, 1993). These emphases are not surprising in a parenting curriculum and are also significant in parenting interventions for nonincarcerated parents (Abidin, 1982; Schaeffer & Briesmeister, 1989; Serketich & Dumas, 1996).

Given the unique demands, stressors, and contexts for maintaining a parent relationship from prison, however, parenting training for inmates also needs to attend to the unique features of prison parenting. Several features present in one or more of the programs examined appear to be promising elements.

**Peer support.** Training programs can benefit from the establishment of a positive peer culture among inmate parents and the development of support structures that inmates can access outside the training milieu. For example, Moore and Clement (1998) describe a program developed in Virginia, Mothers Inside Loving Kids, which includes an array of support services offered to a selected group of women who meet regularly for mutual support and education. This program, which is still in operation, continues to rely on an established support network so that inmates can collaboratively plan activities for upcoming visits, take advantage of offered parent training, and counsel one another through difficult times (S. Dunn, personal communication, May 8, 2006).

**Communication.** Unlike typical communication patterns among nonincarcerated parents, communication between inmate parents and their children is generally limited to visits, letter writing, and phone calls. Each of these forms of communication is different in terms of the amount of time spent on each activity and the resulting qualitative experience of parenting. In an examination of the relationship between parenting stress and amount of contact during incarceration, Tuerk and Loper (in press) documented a relationship between lowered parent stress, as measured by scales from the Abidin (1995) Parenting Stress Index, and the amount of mother-child contact. In particular, the amount of letter writing was a stronger predictor of reduced parenting stress than were either the amount of visitation or the number of phone calls. The authors interpreted the results as because of the greater degree of control mothers experienced with letter writing relative to the other two forms of communication. Parenting programs designed for nonincarcerated populations do not target long-distance relationships and do not cover topics such as phone and letter communication. Incarceration-specific programs need to emphasize explicit training in the best methods for communicating via mail and telephone, with advice on what to say, how much emotional content to convey, the best ways of voicing support, and other strategies.

**Emotional well-being.** As a group, inmates experience high levels of mental illness and emotional distress that may undermine their ability to cope with the stresses of parenting from prison (Beck & Maruschak, 2001; Ditton, 1999; Warren et al., 2002). Particularly among female inmates, there are likely to be relatively high levels of sexual and physical abuse history (A. Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Maeve, 2000),
which will likely affect relationships with children. Because of their mental health histories, some inmates may lack the emotional reserves to cope with the stressful nature of visitation, particularly when problems arise. Boudin (1998) countered this by placing emphasis on helping mothers cope with their own emotional issues, particularly their trauma histories, guilt about past choices, and grief at separation from their family. A sadly familiar story in women’s prisons is that of an inmate who eagerly looks forward to a visit, only to have an angry meltdown during the visit when she learns disturbing news. For most inmate parents, visits with children are rare events, with approximately half of the inmate mothers and fathers never receiving any visits (Mumola, 2000). Because of the rarity of these visits, emotionally charged or explosive events during visitation can be particularly toxic, leading children and caretakers to resist returning. Inmate parents need to cope with their own strong feelings about themselves as parents so that they can better handle the stresses of separation. They benefit from strategies to monitor and reevaluate their own automatic thoughts and feelings prior to reacting. These strategies need to be explicitly taught, however, and related to the context of parenting.

**Provision for lower educational levels.** Inmates in the United States tend to be more poorly educated than the general public (Harlow, 2003). Materials adapted from training materials designed for nonincarcerated populations may be too difficult for some inmates to understand. Eddy et al. (2001) responded to this challenge by designing training materials that emphasized the use of visuals and simple language. Recognition of the varied educational and social backgrounds of incarcerated parents presents a special challenge for working with this population.

**Liaison with child caretakers.** In any training program for parents of incarcerated children, concerns about the caretaker who is responsible for the day-to-day rearing of the child is often the “elephant in the room.” Virtually every aspect of inmates’ relationships with their children relates to the quality of the relationship between the inmate and caregiver. Caregivers are usually the major factor in determining when and how often children visit. They can facilitate or impede phone calls or letters between children and inmates, and they bear the greatest responsibility for handling crises. Caretakers typically experience significant stress while raising a child who has at least one parent in prison (Burton, 1992; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Ruiz, 2002). Grandparents most frequently raise the children when their daughter is incarcerated (Mumola, 2000) and are faced with the emotional and physical burdens that parenthood brings. In a series of in-depth qualitative analyses of interviews and observations of Black grandparents rearing children of drug-addicted parents, Burton (1992) documented a pervasive sense of fatigue and concern about the long-term nature of the grandparents’ responsibilities. Several lamented the loss of freedom that they had expected to enjoy during their senior years. Grandparents also voiced concerns about having the cognitive and physical energy to keep up with children’s school needs.
Parenting training for inmates needs to include issues related to the caretaker. Incarcerated parents may need guidance in understanding caretaker stressors so that they can better empathize and establish realistic expectations about their own parenting role. Learning how to “partner parent” with another caretaker requires smooth communication and relationship building, skills that need to be explicitly taught and emphasized in training.

**Dealing with institutional constraints.** Unlike parenting training designed for the general population, there are a number of institutional factors that can alter the content and process of training. For example, Schram and Morash (2002) lamented the intrusion of loudspeaker announcements that frequently interrupt classes and a poor understanding of the value of parenting programming by some institutional staff. Eddy et al. (2001) also noted initial difficulties in gaining the cooperation of skeptical officers. Routine institutional security features also affect programming; problems with completing daily inmate counts, for example, can delay or cancel the return of inmates to training. Light switches that can only be operated by certain staff members may make it difficult for inmates to view overheads, videos, or other projections. Inmates may be restricted in the types of handouts and materials they are allowed to use. Successful implementation of parenting interventions in prisons requires the instructor to gain the cooperation of institutional officials as to the value of programming and the need for an adequate instructional environment.

**Unanswered Question: Does One Size Fit All?**

The context for parenting training in prison can vary considerably. The parent’s gender, ethnic background, length of sentence, time served, level of institutional security, and other factors may influence the optimal type of training intervention. At this stage of research into parenting training programs, however, very little information is available about possible interaction effects between an inmate’s particular situation and the most effective training content.

**Gender of parent.** Incarcerated mothers and fathers have unique needs and types of relationships with their children. Because more incarcerated mothers than fathers were single parents prior to incarceration, parental imprisonment generally causes more disruption for the children of incarcerated mothers. Compared to children with a father in prison, a greater proportion of children with a mother in prison move into the home of a relative or foster parent (Mumola, 2000). In many cases, this transition necessitates moving to a new town or city and developing new friendships, which compounds adjustment to the mother’s absence. Kazura (2001) used a self-report measure to assess the perceived needs of incarcerated mothers and fathers regarding themselves and their family members. Women were relatively more interested than men in the effects of separation and how to talk with their children. Women were also more concerned than
Men with finding transportation for children to the facility. These perceived needs make sense considering the greater likelihood that the mothers’ children would be placed with a nonparent caretaker, which makes developing new types of relationships with their children a high priority. The greater frequency of a nonparent guardian also necessitates that incarcerated mothers learn skills for negotiating and collaborating with caretakers to remain in contact with their children.

Men may also have gender-specific stressors that require conceptual and practical alterations to parent training (Palm, 2001). For example, men may have more difficulty relating to their children when their previous role as the family’s financial support is lost. Magaletta and Herbst (2001) noted the helplessness of men who view their paternal role as one of activity or doing concrete things for their children. When constrained from contact by prison, many could not name any ways in which they could continue to provide fatherly support. Men who have not enjoyed emotionally close relationships with their children may have more difficulty finding methods of expressing affection and caring while in prison. Developing affective skills was a feature of Landreth and Lobaugh’s (1998) intervention, which specifically taught fathers how to attend to and empathize with their children’s emotions. Children of fathers who received this training demonstrated a concomitant increase in self-concept at posttest.

Men who were not the primary caretaker prior to incarceration may have a more tangential relationship with their children and may experience difficulty connecting with their children because of their ambiguous parental status. For example, Eddy et al. (2001) reported that approximately one fifth of the fathers participating in their training program had no legal or biological connection to the children but felt a connection because of their relationship with the mother. This tangential status of some inmate fathers can affect their understanding of the impact of separation. Martin (2000) interviewed jailed fathers and observed that men with less preincarceration day-to-day contact with their children were poorly attuned to their children’s needs. These fathers minimized the impact of their separation on their family. In contrast, men with frequent preincarceration contact were extremely upset by the separation. These fathers were more likely to agonize over the separation, even to the point of sometimes refusing visitation efforts because of a perception that these visits would be too emotionally difficult for both themselves and their children. The emotional impact of parental separation may affect men and women differently because incarcerated men typically have less preincarceration contact.

Sentence conditions. Parenting interventions may likewise need to be tailored according to sentence length. Inmates with short sentences will likely be reunited with minor children within a relatively short period. These parents may therefore wish or need to maintain a more direct role in decisions regarding their children. They may need training in how to maintain their own status as the primary parent while collaborating with the caretaker. Long-term inmates, however, may need more instruction on how to maintain an affective bond in the context of a lengthy separation.
Similar to the questions of whether treatments for long- and short-term offenders should be different is the question of the importance of distinguishing between inmates who will be released at or near the end of training from those whose incarceration will continue. For parents who will soon resume day-to-day care of their children, there may be a greater need to learn behavior-management techniques or other strategies for coping with full-time contact. In these situations, interventions designed for nonincarcerated populations may be more transferable. For example, Wilczak and Markstrom (1999) designed an intervention for fathers in a minimum-security facility who had relatively short amounts of time to serve prior to reunification. Their intervention incorporated a widely used parenting training intervention designed for the general population (STEP; Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1989). In contrast, parents who face a longer separation may need support to maintain healthy relationships with children and long-term caregivers.

Unanswered Question: Is Parenting Training Always a Good Idea?

An explicit goal in several of the programs reviewed is to enhance the connection between an incarcerated parent and his or her child. Although there is evidence that this goal is achievable and can have beneficial effects, it is not clear whether there are contexts in which children might be better served if the relationship were not encouraged. For example, an effort to reconnect an estranged parent with his or her child might have negative effects on the child if the parent is unreliable and loses interest after initiating the reunion. In addition, inmates with severe personality disorders, including psychopathy, may use the relationship for manipulative or self-gratifying purposes that are unhealthy for the child. In a series of interviews with 24 female inmates, Forsyth (2003) noted that the discourse of 2 of the inmates was characterized by little real feeling for their children and the assumption that by behaving in a way that appeared motherly, they would make a better impression on their parole board. Although there is available research that evaluates the overall benefits of specific programs, it would be helpful to understand the personality characteristics or other features of inmates that distinguish parent-child relationships that may benefit from parent training from those that either will not benefit or that will be negatively affected.

Conclusion

As the number of incarcerated Americans continues to rise, it is likely that correctional facilities will strive to meet family needs by providing parenting services. Although research on effective parenting training in prison is still in its infancy, existing studies offer promise and provide support for the value of helping incarcerated mothers and fathers become better parents. Interventions may improve attitudes toward parenting, self-confidence, institutional behavior, and, in some cases, child outcomes. Information on best practices for these programs, however, is limited.
Although there is some evidence of effective programming, as demonstrated in this review, there are few efforts to replicate or improve specific interventions. Little is known about how to best modify existing curricula to meet prison-specific needs. Many existing programs, run by well-intentioned volunteers, are rarely evaluated in a systematic way. Better dissemination of information concerning effective interventions is greatly needed in this area.

The available body of literature and practice provides guideposts to develop effective interventions. Primary among these is the need to be aware of the importance of placing parenting training in a prison-specific context. Parenting from prison is substantially different from parenting on the outside. An intervention that helps a mother effectively handle tantrums at the mall is of little value to a mother who only sees her daughter for a few hours every month in a confined and typically inhospitable setting. Parents in prison need instruction on how to maintain healthy bonds, communicate in truthful and developmentally sensitive ways, and collaborate with caretakers within the context of incarceration.

The model parenting program provides personal support for inmate parents. This can include peer support from other inmates, personal support from facilitators, and sensitivity from institutional staff. For many inmates, discussing their children’s needs can provoke intense feelings of guilt, sadness, and anger. Optimal training provides a forum for inmate parents to process these feelings in a safe and constructive way.

Similarly, a model program provides a strategy for dealing with problems in a flexible and creative way. Correctional settings are, by nature, structured and rule bound. They embody the black-and-white thinking that categorizes actions as either acceptable or unacceptable. Although this cognitive template has a longstanding history in corrections, it is not particularly useful for parenting. The ideal parenting program in prison works with inmates to develop flexible plans for dealing with the problems of parenting. For example, visits often do not turn out as parents may wish. Inmate parents need to know how to stay focused on their goals and be ready to think up creative, on-the-spot solutions.

Parenting instruction for inmates needs to be done in conjunction with actual child contact. It is difficult to practice newly developed skills without opportunities to use the training. This does not mean, however, that the sole focus should be either visitation or upcoming reunification. Parenting programs should explore the full range of communication methods that are available to the inmate, such as letter writing, phone calls, and collaboration with child caregivers. Many inmates do not receive regular visits, and for those who do, such visits can be limited by logistical and emotional concerns. Effective parenting training shows inmates how to make the best of all their contact opportunities.

It is important to recognize that among parenting programs for inmates, there will not be a single program that meets all needs; there is room for many different types. Rather than seeking the gold standard for inmate parenting training, there is a need for well-researched programs, each defining a particular target audience, goals, and
method. Furthermore, policy makers and prison administrators are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about the financial benefits of using empirically based treatments in programming; the move toward evidence-based practice in prisons requires that we, as researchers of parenting interventions in prison, improve the scientific rigor of program assessments to maintain legitimacy. As we refine our methods of intervention and assessment, our work will be more effective for the population we hope to serve. The rewards of improved parent-child relationships and better adjusted inmates will be well worth the effort of refining this important body of work.

References


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