

Parent-Child Communication in Correctional Settings:

Policy Recommendations

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The maintenance of prisoner-family ties and parent-child bonds is increasingly becoming recognized as an important corrections and social services objective (Holt & Miller, 1970; Howser & McDonald, 1982; Leclair, 1978). Research has demonstrated the importance of frequent visiting between separated parents and their children to the well-being of parents and children and to the eventual reunification of separated families (Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Greif, 1979; Hess, 1987; Lanier, 1987; and Wallerstein, 1983). Parenting programs and children's centers are being established in correctional settings, reflecting the emerging interest in prisoner-family ties (Adalist-Estrin, 1986; Brozan, 1986; Hairston & Lockett, 1987).

It is important to note, however, that family ties during imprisonment depend not only on individual preferences but also on state policies. Prisoner-family communication policies demonstrate the value states place on the maintenance of prisoners' family relationships and on parent-child contact. Policies provide the context for visiting practices and procedures in individual institutions and provide guidance for allocation of resources, such as staff and space, for visiting. They inhibit or facilitate the development of family programs in institutions and the ability of private agencies to serve the prison population. Policies, in addition, provide clarity for parents, children, and children's caretakers concerning visiting eligibility,

conditions, and purposes.

A recent national survey (Hairston and Hess, 1988) indicates that parent-child relationships are rarely addressed in state corrections policies. The study found that policies governing visiting seldom reflect the special needs of children, the importance of parent-child attachments, or the nature of complex family networks. There are wide variations in policy and broad discretion regarding visiting practices, a lack of attention to minimum standards and expectations for parent-child contact and vague discretionary directives.

The frequency with which a child may visit a parent is limited as is the length of time the two may spend together. Often the child's custodial parent, an adult who may have little or no interest in the inmate, is identified as the sole source of approval for a child's visit or as the only adult who may accompany the child on a visit. Restrictions are placed on social interactions between parents and children during visits and discipline and control of children are stressed without provision of child-centered activities. These findings, clearly point to the need for the development of more family-oriented policies to govern parent-child visiting.

Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations which follow are made with the intent of strengthening prisoners' family ties in general and enhancing relationships between incarcerated parents and their children specifically. Since visiting is one of the primary means by which

incarcerated parents and their children are able to communicate, visiting policies are the focus of these recommendations. Each of the recommendations is followed by a brief discussion and, where appropriate, presentation of different policy implementation models.

Recommendation 1

Child-centered, supervised, visiting areas should be established and maintained in all prisons. Toys, books, games, and other activities appropriate for children of different ages should be provided.

The visiting room environment should promote informal, relaxed social interaction between parents and children. Areas where parents and children can play together and children may engage in activities while adults spend some private time alone promote the maintenance of family relationships. It is not reasonable to expect young children, without anything to do, to sit still and remain orderly throughout a prison visit. Even older children become restless when talking is the only activity permitted.

Safe, secure and orderly child-centered visiting areas have been successfully established in several prisons. Bedford Hills (New York) Correction Center has a Children's Center where mothers and children can visit together (Henry, 1987). A playroom for visiting children has

been established at Bucks County (Pennsylvania) Rehabilitation Center (Adalist-Estrin, 1986). Staff are available to assist parents and visiting children in cooperative play and communication of feelings. Parents in Prison, an inmate organization at Tennessee State Penitentiary, provides books, board games, drawing materials, and cards for children who visit in the prison visiting room. More active games, play equipment and supervised activities are provided on the outdoor visiting grounds.

Recommendation 2

Visitation schedules should be flexible and permit children to visit on different days and at different times. Opportunities for weekday, weekend and evening visits should be provided.

Children's days are scheduled differently depending on their ages. For example, school-aged children (5-18) cannot easily visit on weekdays except during late afternoon after school. School-aged children who must travel great distances to visit an incarcerated parent cannot visit during the week without missing school. Infants and toddlers who go to sleep early are often more irritable if they must visit in the evening. Therefore, it is essential that visiting hours for children and youth be available at a range of times and days of the week. Lack of variation will create an access barrier for children.

Recommendation 3

Children and incarcerated parents should be permitted to have, at

a minimum, weekly visits. If parent-child relationships are to be protected and maintained, contact must be frequent. Parent-child relationships are the result of on-going interactions between the child and the parent. Without frequent contact and interactions, children cannot hold on to the memory of the incarcerated parent. The incarcerated parent may eventually be experienced by the child as a stranger. In institutions where visits are allowed only bi-weekly or monthly, parent-child relationships are at risk.

Recommendation 4

Periodic opportunities for extended visits (day-long and/or overnight) between incarcerated parents and their children should be provided. Family-oriented extended visits which include the incarcerated parents, the custodial parent, children, and other family members should be an integral part of prison visiting.

The quality of the interaction between parent and child during visits influences the quality of the relationship. In order for relationships to be experienced as meaningful, parent-child interactions must be natural and allow for give and take. Children must be able to experience both parents as parents who participate in their care. For there to be mutual, meaningful interaction, a child's time with parents must be sufficient in length to allow for activities that occur naturally, allow for give and take, and include routine child-caring

responsibilities for both parents. It is essential for children, their parents, and other family members to experience being a family and sharing activities that are family-oriented. Longer and frequent visits are important for another reason. Children of incarcerated parents experience deep pain and stress related to the separation. Relief from separation distress often occurs when visits are longer. Children often find it easier to separate at a visits' end when they know they will soon have a long period of time with their incarcerated parent again. Children who are able to experience less separation distress have more energy available for school, friends, and their continuing development.

Extended visits take many forms and have been implemented successfully in different states. New York's Family Reunion program allows family members to spend 48 hours or more in a home-type environment. They are able to cook, eat, sleep and play together as a family unit. Tennessee State Penitentiary allows day-long visits on the picnic grounds. Illinois' Dwight Correctional Center provides overnight campouts for mothers and children.

Recommendation 5

Children should be permitted to visit their incarcerated parents, without written permission from their custodial parent or guardian. Children 16 years of age and older should be permitted to visit unaccompanied. Minor children should be accompanied by an adult on the inmate's visiting list or an adult in an official capacity such as the child's social worker. The only exceptions to this recommendation should be those required by court order.

Prison officials are not in a position to determine what's best for a child, to resolve family disputes, or to monitor complex family relations. Prison regulations which require a custodian's written permission for children to visit, or permit children to visit only when accompanied by the custodial parent places the prison in that role. It is generally acknowledged that embittered parents frequently will not permit a child to visit based on their own interests, rather than on the child's interest. At other times separated spouses are not opposed to, or may be in favor of, children spending time with their incarcerated parents, but prefer not to visit themselves. In these situations, a policy that requires the child's custodial parent to accompany the child on a visit, results in the child's inability to visit.

Recommendation 6

Parent education, parent support groups and family counseling should be made available to inmates. These services should be provided by social services staff who are professionally prepared in the social and behavioral sciences. Services could be provided by professional corrections staff or contracted to community agencies.

Studies consistently demonstrate that the majority of inmates in male and female prisons are parents. Most feel guilty about the disruption they are causing in their children's lives, worry about their children, and want to be better parents (Baunach, 1985; Hairston, 1989; Lanier, 1987). Many, however, have inadequate preparation for parenting.

Educational programs and parent support groups can help parents better understand and respond to the normal developmental needs of their children and the special problems caused by parental absence. They can assist parents in preparing for visits, in addressing children's and custodial parents' concerns which arise from visits and in dealing with their own stresses associated with their limited involvement in their children's lives.

Numerous examples of prison-based parent-education and parental support services are available for replication. According to a survey conducted by Boudouris (1985), almost all women's prisons offer some form of a parenting class. Although these classes are seldom available in men's prisons there are some models in existence. The Wisconsin Resource Center, for example, provides a 16-week family living class for male inmates. Parents in Prison, a Tennessee-based organization, offers home study courses and parenting seminars for incarcerated fathers.

Recommendation 7

A prison staff social worker should be designated to coordinate services for prisoners whose children are placed in foster care. Such services will include arrangements for visiting with children and for meetings between incarcerated parents and community professionals serving their children. One of the essential qualifications of this staff member is familiarity with the child welfare system's expectations of parents with children in placement.

Parents of children in foster care are expected to demonstrate their willingness and ability to perform in the parental role. Parents who are incarcerated and correctional staff are often not aware of the child welfare system's requirements for the development of case plans for children in foster care placement, of agency expectations regarding parental contacts and visiting, and of the opportunity for parents to participate in court and other case reviews. This lack of information leads to a lack of involvement which is often interpreted as disinterest in parenting or lack of cooperation with the child welfare system. In the extreme, this lack of involvement can lead to termination of a prisoner's parental rights.

Child welfare caseworkers are often not informed about the correctional system's policies and programs for visiting or about options for involving prisoners in service planning for their children. Thus, both the corrections and child welfare systems may inadvertently contribute to outcomes harmful to prisoners and their children in foster care.

It is essential that prisoners with children in foster care be provided information concerning their rights and responsibilities as parents and that professionals in the child welfare system be provided ready access to incarcerated parents of children they serve. These goals will best be assured by the provision of coordination of services within the correctional facility.

These recommendations cannot be easily implemented without attention to

resources including staff, facilities, and appropriate equipment and materials. Further, the state's stage of development regarding its family orientation will need to be addressed. While difficulties must be recognized, all of the above recommendations have been implemented in different institutions. Therefore, we are optimistic that as issues related to resources and attitudes are addressed, these recommendations can be implemented in all correctional institutions.

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