


1-1998

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Recommended Citation

Palm, Glen F, "Working with Fathers...Working with Incarcerated Fathers" (1998). *Faculty Publications*. 5.
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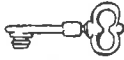


Working with Fathers...

By Glen Palm, Ph.D.

Working with Incarcerated Fathers

Key Words:



fathering, prison (fathers in), incarcerated fathers)

“Incarcerated fathers want to improve their parenting skills.”

Working with incarcerated fathers has become a regular part of my responsibilities as coordinator of the *Dad's Project*. Our family education program was invited by the education director at the state correctional facility in our town to consider offering a parenting class for male inmates. The prison in our community serves 800-900 young adult males. The fathers that I have worked with over the last three years have ranged in age from 17 to 28. The education director pointed out that the Minnesota state correctional system has served more than 70,000 inmates since 1979 and that the majority are now back in our communities. The purpose of education in the correctional system is to prepare inmates to reenter the community. Parent education for incarcerated fathers fits into the general educational goals of the correctional system and fathers do want to improve their parenting skills (Hairston, 1987). An interesting fact emerged during this initial visit. There were no official records of how many men were fathers. Fatherhood was not recognized as an important “statistic” to track for men in prison. It can also be difficult to track because many of the men are not married and have not established paternity. As I left after the first meeting it was clear that there was a need for a parenting class for fathers. This article will focus on exploring the parent education needs of incarcerated fathers. While the statistics on the number of fathers in prison are not known, there are over 1.5 million children with parents in prison and the majority of these parents are the biological fathers (Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents, 1992).

At the time that I started to work at the St. Cloud Correctional facility, I was completing some research on the *meaning of fatherhood* and the *influence of fatherhood on adult male development*. I used a combination of focus groups and semi-structured interviews to elicit information about the importance of fatherhood in men's lives. This process was adapted to learn more about incarcerated fathers and their unique needs. Although I had worked with fathers for 15 years in a variety of settings, this was a new environment and a new group. I started with three focus groups of ten fathers and then selected 12 men from the focus groups for individual interviews. This approach allowed me to focus on listening to the men describe their families, their thoughts and feelings about fatherhood and their current struggles around being good fathers. The interviews were an effective way to establish some connection and some understanding of individual family situations. I have continued to use individual interviews as a way to *screen* men for the class as well as to understand the individual family situations and motivations for taking the class. There are three basic questions that have helped me to better understand the needs of incarcerated fathers for parent education.

- 1. What is the meaning of fatherhood for incarcerated fathers?**
- 2. What are the unique issues that fathers who are incarcerated face?**
- 3. What do incarcerated fathers want to learn about parenting?**

These questions shed light on the unique perspectives and needs of incarcerated fathers. The following summary is based on a poster session I presented at the National Council on Family Relations conference in November, 1996 (Palm, 1996) and three years working with 75-100 incarcerated fathers.



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"Mothers are often gatekeepers and may want to protect the child by not maintaining contact with the incarcerated father."

1. What is the meaning of fatherhood for incarcerated fathers?

Fatherhood appears to play a central role in shaping men's views of themselves. There are three themes that emerge in response to the meaning of fatherhood. First, fatherhood plays a central role in positive self-identity. This theme was expressed in numerous descriptions of fatherhood as a primary motivation for change. *"Fatherhood has made me feel more confident...like I have a future...it is a time to rearrange priorities."* Another father described fatherhood as *"a need to turn around, to change...to show my daughter she can trust me."* A second important theme to emerge was a new sense of responsibility and maturity...time to move beyond themselves to their family. This theme was also described by several men who depict fatherhood as an important motivation to *grow up*. One father stated, *"Fatherhood has brought me away from things...friends, drugs...my number one priority is my family."* Another father added, *"It made me mature more, focus on my goals for the future and kind of give me a kick in the butt and tell me to get going. No more wasting time, the partying is over now, it is time to get serious."* A final theme that seems important to understanding the meaning of fatherhood for incarcerated fathers was their descriptions of good fathers as "being there." Being there means "spending time with kids and discipline" and "being there physically and emotionally." Many of the men stressed "being there" over the provider role as a more critical indicator of good fatherhood. In general the incarcerated fathers I interviewed expressed a deep sense of caring, love, pride and sadness. The latter related to the limited contact and interaction that they currently have with their children. Some of the tough exterior shield melted as men talked about their children and the times that had been spent with them as a baby or a recent visit. For most men interviewed, fatherhood was a positive piece of self-identity that was waiting to grow, like a seed buried beneath the surface waiting for some nurturance from the outside.

2. What are the unique issues that fathers who are incarcerated face?

All fathers today face the challenge of defining and living the role of the *new involved father*. A primary issue for incarcerated fathers was how to maintain or create a positive relationship with their child through the various barriers that incarceration imposes. This issue was expressed through concerns about expressing love and care from a distance. For example one father said, *"Keeping in contact, let them know I love them. That is all I can do right now."* Another expresses the frustration of limited visitation, *"It is hard to get the kids up here...two months and they have not been here."* Many fathers in the parenting classes that I have taught had limited contact with their children. Another barrier to the father-child relationship can be a strained relationship with the child's mother. One father reported, *"I haven't heard from my child's mother for two months and when I called the phone was disconnected."* Mothers are often gatekeepers and may want to protect the child by not maintaining contact with the incarcerated father.

Another concern that was expressed by fathers was their inability to protect their children. One father explained this concern, *"I guess my major concern would be something major happening to them like an illness, well I don't like to talk about things like this because that seems like when things like that happen. Any illnesses or things like that where I wouldn't be able to go and be with them at their time of need is hard. Like my father passed away a couple of weeks ago, and I wasn't able to go to the funeral which made it very hard...Who knows what I would do if something happened to them, I might end up taking it out on another person which doesn't create anything but more problems."* Other fathers expressed concern about the mother's inability to care for the children, concern about the mother's use of drugs or the mother finding a "new father" for their child.

Another unique concern was how to explain their own behavior and time in prison to their children. A variety of views around this issue were expressed depending

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upon the age of the child and the circumstances. Some fathers felt it was important to be honest with their children while others opted to protect their children by fabricating an alternative explanation for their absence. *"They think I'm away at school...and I am taking GED classes while I'm here."* While honesty may be an important ethical guide it doesn't begin to help to explain a father's incarceration to a young child. This issue has been a good opportunity for discussing development as well as how a parent can admit to making a mistake.

Another unique issue that was mentioned by many fathers was how to control their anger. As one father responded to the question of what he would like to take away from the class, he said, *"How to be a good father and not let anger get in the way."* Anger and violent expressions of this emotion may be one of the most important habits for fathers to work on while incarcerated. Many men will willingly admit to having a "temper" and realize that this can be a barrier in establishing a caring relationship with their child.

The unique issues that fathers face are difficult in isolation. Often incarcerated fathers have created family systems that are very complex and conflictual. Their own family of origin issues and negative lessons about parenting can be another factor that complicates matters. The complexity and depth of these issues stretches the capability of parent education.

3. What do incarcerated fathers want to learn about parenting?

When incarcerated fathers were asked what they would like to learn about in a parenting class, they described some of the typical parenting topics such as **discipline** (*new ways to discipline...I was whooped with a belt...I don't want to spank*); **development** (*I would like to learn more about development.*); and **communication** (*I don't want to just come in and yell...I want to build a close relationship.*). In addition to the typical topics fathers described a number of unique topics for discussion. A major topic was **how to stay close to your child from a distance**. As one father put it, *"I'm trying to keep contact, I don't want to lose the bond."* Another stressed establishing a bond, *"open myself more to people who care about me."* A second topic that was mentioned was **how to address children's emotions, understanding and questions around incarceration**. *"How will my son look at this experience...he gets mad when he visits and wants me to come home with him."* Some fathers were at the point of wanting to discuss **transition to the outside and reconnecting with children**. **Legal issues around custody** were also brought up by some fathers. *"I'd like to learn more about my legal rights around custody. What are available resources for fathers."* A final topic that emerged as one of the most emotion-laden and volatile was **how to develop a respectful relationship with your child's mother**. These topics begin to outline some specific goals for incarcerated fathers and reflect the unique circumstances for trying to grow as an incarcerated parent.

The incarcerated father in many ways is ready and open for parent education. Fathers care deeply about their children and see the potential of a positive relationship with their child as a primary reason for self-improvement. The issues that incarcerated fathers report as unique are important but also difficult to address because of the complex circumstance and the special barriers that incarceration creates. This group seems very willing to explore these difficult issues and appreciative of parent education classes that provide them the opportunity to explore this part of themselves.

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