

# Parenting Connection

Volume 2, Issue 3

November/December 2005

## Families and Offenders United Project Research

In the September/October issue of the Parenting Connection, Michael Bischoff provided information on many of the parenting programs offered in Minnesota correctional facilities. In December 2004, a research paper was published which evaluates the effectiveness of the Families in Focus classes held between July 1, 2003- June 30, 2004 in three Minnesota institutions.

For the past 15 years, the Council on Crime and Justice has taught Families in Focus classes to offenders in Minnesota correctional institutions at Rush City, Stillwater, and Lino Lakes. The Families in Focus parent education program is an auxiliary program of the Families and Offenders United Project (FOUP) offers both pre-release and post-release which support to help offenders and their families through the transitional process of reunification and towards self-sufficiency.

The Families in Focus curriculum is delivered over 12 weeks with 2 hour class sessions. Family educators use a combination of educational presentation and facilitated discussions in their teaching approach. The goal of the course is to help fathers gain a clearer understanding of their own children, their own behavior, and the important role they can play in their children's lives. Each class session

*continued on page 2*

## Spread the Word

Contained in this issue of the Parenting Connection are articles about parenting programs in Virginia and Minnesota. If you would like to spread the word about your innovative program or creative teaching methods, please consider writing an article for this newsletter.

The article can be of any length, from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. Your article may include digital pictures. Send the articles to Diane Birch at [diane.birch@doc.state.wi.us](mailto:diane.birch@doc.state.wi.us).

## Call for Presentations

Region III and Region IV of the Correctional Education Association are partnering to hold a combined regional conference at the Chula Vista Resort in Wisconsin, Dells, WI on May 11-12, 2006, with a Special Education pre-conference workshop on May 10.

The conference planning committee would like to invite you to submit a proposal to present a workshop on your parenting program at the conference.

A Call for Presentations is being posted on the Region III website and in the November/December issue of the CEA-Wisconsin newsletter. To access the CEAW newsletter, go to [www.ceawisconsin.org](http://www.ceawisconsin.org). Click on newsletters and newsletters and November/December 2005.

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 Families and Offenders United Project Research
- 5 Moms, Inc. (Incarcerated)/Dads, Inc. Parenting Programs in Virginia
- 6 Tips for Evaluating Quality Child Care
- 6 Single Parenting Tips

### Send articles and comments to:

Diane Birch  
Stanley Correctional Institution  
100 Corrections Drive  
Stanley, WI 54768  
[diane.birch@doc.state.wi.us](mailto:diane.birch@doc.state.wi.us)

715-644-2960 x 3406

Newsletter layout: Rob Ecker, SCI



addresses a specific topic and each week builds upon the previous one. Class topics address the inheritance of parenting beliefs and practices, parenting and discipline styles, prevention of abuse and violence, anger and self-esteem, child development, and strengthening family relationships.

The Families in Focus program is currently offered in each facility every quarter. Any inmate in Rush City, Stillwater and Lino Lakes can take the course, regardless of their release date and whether they are currently a father. To gauge the effectiveness of the program, the Families in Focus evaluation employed a repeated-measures, non-experimental design with self-report measures. This means that instead of comparing participants' tests at the end of the class to a comparison group, they are compared to the responses on the pre-test.

In the 2003-2004 evaluation of the course by the participants were parents who were allowed contact with their children. 168 class participants completed a series of knowledge questions, subscales of the Family Environment Scale (FES), the Parent-Adolescent Communication (PAC) scale, and a series of parenting behavior questions that include frequency of contact and discipline pre- and post-program in order to measure change over time. This post-test used the same questions as the pre-test, in addition to consumer satisfaction information.

There are twenty-one true-false knowledge questions, which assessed participants' knowledge and beliefs about parenting. These questions were developed based on the Families in Focus curriculum and addressed knowledge around positive discipline practices, the impact of abusive behavior, and child development.

The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale is a 20 item, 5-point Likert-type scale composed of two subscales which measure degree of openness and extent of problems in family communication. The instrument was designed to measure both positive and negative aspects of parent-adolescent communication.

Participants were asked how often they write, call, and visit with their children. Participants are also asked how often they engage in various parenting practices, including behaviors around child interaction and discipline.

The three subscales of the Family Environment scale (FES) that rate the domains of control, expressiveness, and conflict were used to measure elements within the family environment. The *control* scale of the FES measures the power dynamics within the family context. The *expressiveness* scale of the FES measures the extent to which family members are encouraged to act openly and to express the feelings directly. The *conflict* scale of the FES

measures the amount of openly expressed anger, aggression, and conflict among family members.

## Findings

### Knowledge

Ninety-seven percent (N=103) of participants Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the class increased their knowledge of positive parenting practices. Though this suggests a significant increase in knowledge, there was only a modest increase in the knowledge scores between the pre-test and the post-test. The average score at the pre-test was 16.1 and increased to 17.2 at the post-test, out of a total of 21 possible correct answers. This means that on average, respondents answered one more question correctly at the post-test than at the pre-test. Although the change in knowledge score was small, when compared using the independent sample t-test, the difference was found to be statistically significant.

### Contact with Children

Participants were asked about how often they had contact with their children in three ways:

- ❖ Written contact
- ❖ Phone contact (calling)
- ❖ In-person contact (visits)

Participants were given the response options of: "never", "daily", "weekly", "monthly", and "once a year".

There was a slight decrease in frequency of written contacts moving from weekly to monthly. When looking at the distribution of responses at the pre-test and the post-test, the following changes can be noted:

- ❖ Reporting of weekly or more contact decreased from 45.7% at the pre-test to 35.6% at the post-test.
- ❖ Reporting of monthly contact increased from 36.4% at the pre-test to 52.2% at the post-test.

There was a slight change in the frequency of both phone contact and visiting, though these changes were not found to be statistically significant. There was a slight increase in phone contacts moving from monthly towards weekly. Frequency of visits saw a slight decrease, moving from monthly toward yearly.

### Family Practices

Class participants were surveyed on how often they engaged in a variety of family practices both prior to entering prison and after completion of the class. Respondents were given a Likert scale of response



options, including “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, “always”.

- ❖ *Listening to the children.* Class participants reported listening to their children more often at the post-test. At the pre-test, 82.7% of participants reported that they did this often or always. This increased to 92.6% at the post-test.
- ❖ *Trying to understand how child sees things.* Class participants reported that they try to understand how their children see things more often at the post-test. At the pre-test, 74.5% of participants reported that they did this often or always. This increased to 89.5% at the post-test.
- ❖ *Following through on commitments to children.* Class participants reported that they follow through on their commitments to their children more often at the post-test. At the pre-test, 63.2% of participants reported doing this often or always. This increased to 75.5% at the post-test.
- ❖ *Giving children choices.* Participants reported giving their children choices more often at the post-test than at the pre-test. At the pre-test 64.5% of participants reported doing this often or always. At the post-test this increased to 74.2%.
- ❖ *Influence on Caregiver over Parenting Issues.* Class participants were more likely to report having influence on their child’s caregiver over parenting decisions at the end of the class. At the pre-test 24% of respondents reported that they have no influence on child’s caregiver and how the child is being parented. At the post-test only 14% reported having no influence.

## Positive Discipline

When asked at the end of class, 95.3% of participants Agreed or Strongly Agreed that they learned about positive discipline methods in the class. In addition, of the 45.8% who reported they used spanking as a form of discipline prior to the class, 65% (N= 26) reported they will spank their children less as a result of taking the class.

Participants were also asked to rate themselves on family practices related to discipline:

- ❖ *Taking away activities to discipline their children.* Class participants reported that they take away activities to discipline their children less often at the post-test. At the pre-test, 23.0% of participants reported doing this often or always. This decreased to 12.9% at the post-test.
- ❖ *Giving time outs to discipline children.* Participants reported giving time outs to discipline their children less often. At the pre-test 23.0% of participants reported doing this often or always. At the post-test this decreased to 14.1%.

## Strengthened Relationships and Skills Gained

Class participants reported a strengthening of their family relationships due to the class, with 96.1% (N=98) either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the class helped them strengthen their family relationships. In addition, 87% (N=80) of participants reported that their relationship with their children has improved since being in the class. Class participants also experienced an increase in resources and skills due to the class. Ninety-seven percent (N=103) of respondents Agree or Strongly Agree that the class gave them resources and skills to solve at least one problem or need in their family situation. When asked what problem the class helped participants resolve, responses including the following were listed:

- ❖ How to discipline in a positive way and as a way to teach, not hurt.
- ❖ Better parenting skills in talking and communication with my daughter.
- ❖ Talking more with my daughter and giving her more room to grow up.
- ❖ How to raise my child’s self-esteem and teach instead of punish.
- ❖ How I’m going to establish and maintain relationships with my children now, no matter what age they are when I finally meet them, keeping positive methods upfront.
- ❖ Realizing that it’s never too late or too early to learn.
- ❖ How to get my son to be more talkative on the phone, open up, and tell me things that are going on with him.
- ❖ Be more open to stage of developments of our children and when they act out it’s about them and not me. It’s not personal.
- ❖ How to be a more effective parent from prison.
- ❖ It’s okay to tell my children I’m in jail and to be sure to remember everything they say on the phone.
- ❖ Communicate with my children and being able to express my feelings.
- ❖ It helps me see some of the reasons my sons are acting out and some ways of dealing with it.
- ❖ How to handle anger when disciplining children.
- ❖ It gave me tools to become a democratic parent. To encourage my son and parent him with patience, education, understanding, and humility; with less physical discipline and more love.



## Family Environment Scale

The Family Environment Scale (FES) includes three subscales which measure the following domains of the family environment: expressiveness, conflict, and control. There was no statistically significant change in scores on the three sub-scales of the FES between the pre- and post-tests. In the Expressiveness subscale, out of a possible total score of 9, respondents had an average score of 4.5 at both the pre-test and the post-test. When comparing the average score on the Conflict subscale between the pre-and post-test, there was a slight decrease from 3.9 to 3.6. The Control subscale average slightly increased from 5.8 at the pre-test to 5.9.

## Interpretation and Discussion

### *Knowledge*

Clearly class participants believe that the class has increased their knowledge of positive parenting practices. However, participants only had a modest increase in knowledge scores. One reason for the very small change in knowledge score is because at the pre-test respondents already scored fairly high on the test (average of 78.5% of correct answers). A “ceiling effect” may have been at play, where participants entered the class with enough knowledge to answer the pre-test that at the post-test, there was little room for an increase in knowledge. More work needs to be done to make the knowledge questions more challenging, so that scores at the pre-test are lower. In addition, the test may not be measuring what participants are actually learning in the class.

### *Contact with Children*

Results on contact with children are different than had been expected. Increases in all three types of contact were anticipated. Writing decreased at a statistically significant level. There was a slight shift in the frequency of calling, away from monthly and toward weekly, but this change was not found to be statistically significant. In addition, there was also a slight decrease in the frequency of visits. The limited amount of choice participants have around contact may impact these findings. Participants face limitations by the correctional facility both around phone calls and visits. In addition, the locality and engagement of children and their caregivers have a large impact on whether visits to the prison are made and phone calls are received.

### *Influence on Children’s Caregiver*

Class participants’ perceptions of the influence they have on their child(ren)’s caregiver over parenting decisions seem to increase by the end of the class. Although there is a shift between participants reporting “no influence” to “some or heavy influence”, this change between groups is only at a level approaching statistical significance. Class participants appear to have a marked improvement in:

- ❖ listening to their children

- ❖ trying to understand how their children see things
- ❖ following through on their commitments to their children
- ❖ using the removal of activities as a way to discipline their children

### *Discipline*

Ninety-five percent (N=102) of participants report that they learned about positive discipline methods from the class. Participants who previously used spanking as a form of discipline in the past are less likely to use it in the future, as a result of taking the class. For the most part, class participants did not have a change in discipline practices, except for the removal of activities as a form of discipline.

This difference between perceptions and reported behaviors could be for a few different reasons. First of all, participants knowledge about and attitudes toward discipline practices may have improved, but fathers may not have the opportunity to implement these new practices. In addition, as mentioned previously, it is unclear what role incarcerated fathers play with active parenting and discipline from prison, so these behaviors may not be part of their every day experience.

### *Family Environment Scale*

No significant change was identified in the Family Environment Scale subscales of Expressiveness, Control, and Conflict. One possible reason for this is that the 12-week gap between tests may not have been enough time for a difference to be measured. This is especially true since participants are not in ongoing direct contact with their families. More evaluation work is needed to understand how active parenting may play out for incarcerated fathers.

## Conclusions

Overall, participants perceptions of the impact of the course are more marked than the measured change in response to test items. It may be necessary to better understand what it looks like when incarcerated fathers are involved with parenting their children from prison. Having a better understanding of this dynamic may help us to better identify what kinds of changes in actual parenting practices can be expected during incarceration.

In addition, further tool development is needed to ensure that the pre-test and post-test are measuring what we are trying to measure. Specifically the knowledge questions need to be refined to be more challenging and to fit the curriculum.

More information on this research project may be obtained by contacting Michael Bischoff, Manager of Projects, Council of Crime and Justice at 651-222-8191 or [bischoffm@crimeandjustice.org](mailto:bischoffm@crimeandjustice.org).



# Moms, Inc. (Incarcerated)/ Dads, Inc. : Parenting Programs in Virginia

There is a gap between the ideal and the reality of parenting programs for incarcerated parents. The cornerstone of effective parenting programs in prison should be to provide parents with a strong sense of responsibility to assume the role of a parent while in prison to whatever degree possible. Parenting education programs from prison should act as a mechanism to strengthen relationships between parent and child/children and caregiver(s). Furthermore, parent education ought to offer incarcerated parents a clearer understanding of the impact of parental incarceration on the lives of their children at different developmental stages and the caregiver(s) involved.

Inmate parent education could also offer parents insight into problematic situations that their children and caregivers may encounter. Incarcerated parents equipped with this knowledge might be able to communicate more positive messages to their children. They could learn skills to facilitate insight into changing or diminishing their children's negative behavior problems. Incarcerated parents need to learn how to use these skills during visits, letters, and phone calls.

The Virginia Department of Correctional Education began the Moms, Inc. parenting program in 1999. We have only recently expanded from two to five facilities to include mothers and fathers. Early on DCE realized the need for a specialized program that would educate parents and attempt to rebuild broken families. The primary goals of *Moms, Inc./Dads, Inc.* include (1) providing education, information, and support for incarcerated mothers and fathers that allows them to better understand the social, psychological, and emotional problems their children may encounter, and (2) improving the quality of present and future relationships between incarcerated mothers and fathers and their children by assisting them in learning to parent from prison.

*Moms, Inc./Dads, Inc.* aspires to increase parents' level of self-esteem through education and by offering information, knowledge, and support concerning the impact of incarceration on their children. Knowledge may lead to empowerment and a renewed sense of identity as a parent.

Program objectives focus on the legal problems that many mothers experience during their incarceration. These problems may come in the form of custody, visitation, and termination of parental rights. When mothers and fathers enter the system, no one explains to them the difficulties they will face as parents and of the difficulties that may face their children and caregivers.

These issues are explicitly taught in the *Moms/Dads, Inc.* program.

Communication during the incarceration between parents and their children through letters, phone calls, and visits is an important component of the curriculum. The program aims to improve communication skills by teaching parents how significant letter writing can be. Letters are a means of contact different from visits and phone calls. Sending a letter is under the mother's control, while she cannot control whether the family brings a child to visit or permits expensive phone calls. Maintaining communication is fundamental to keeping relationships stable and consistent as well as increasing the bond between parent and child.

The program addresses issues of children's feelings and emotions (i.e., fear and anxiety, anger, guilt, shame, sadness, and isolation) and aims to increase parents' knowledge and awareness. It also aims to increase parents' self-esteem. The program teaches that by increasing their self-efficacy, they may become more empowered and engaged as parents.

The facilitators attend to cultural differences through discussions of social context. Simple lessons and real-life experiences are used to demonstrate the complex concept that beliefs, priorities, and family structure are multidirectional and interactive.

This program is an institutionally-based, voluntary parent education program. Parents appear to be motivated by the love of their children and natural desire to strengthen relationships. Participants also earn the right for an extra privilege. Each individual is permitted to send an audio message in which they talk to their child or record a book on tape and mail it home to the child. In addition, problem-specific videos and volunteer guest speakers from the community are utilized to increase participants' knowledge and comprehension of the problems their children may face at different developmental stages.

For more information, please feel free to contact Sue Kennon, Parenting Education Coordinator at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women in Goochland, Virginia at P.O. Box One, Goochland, VA 23063 or call (804) 784-3582, Ext. 3754. I developed this program along with Peg Ruggiero in 1998 with many changes along the way. I was incarcerated at VCCW for 15 years. I received an M.S. upon release from Virginia Commonwealth University and am now a licensed teacher in Virginia. I am very fortunate that Virginia's Department of Correctional Education stands by their mission statement and offered me the opportunity to be a part of the dedicated administration and staff who believe in this cause.

I wish the best of luck to all who are interested in furthering this most worthy area of interest. I believe the key to remember is: "This is ultimately about the children!"

Sue Kennon, M.S.  
Parenting Education Coordinator  
Virginia Department of Correctional Education



## Tips for Evaluating Quality Child Care

1. How does your child-care provider greet your child in the morning? Studies show that the warmth of the relationship between children and their providers is the key to quality care. If children don't feel safe and cared about, they will have difficulties learning and growing.
2. Is your caregiver tuned in to your child? Quality care givers are responsive and able to read a child's cues – these characteristics are essential for promoting emotional and intellectual development.
3. What do you see at the end of the day? Is your child busy and engaged in activities or does he/she rush to cling to you? If it's the latter, they may be bored and starved for attention – and in need of a new daytime environment.
4. What is the adult-to-child ratio? You can get this information from your county or state licensing agencies or request the information directly from your childcare provider.
5. What is the teacher turnover? Constant turnover can be disruptive. Does your provider have a history of job-hopping? Look for long term commitment.
6. Do the teachers have advanced training? Well trained providers understand how children develop and are better able to meet their needs. Those who bother to learn how kids grow are more likely to put some thought into furthering your child's development.
7. Is the environment safe, clean and inviting? Are basic health and safety measures such as hand washing procedures, emergency contact numbers, age appropriate equipment and interesting activities present at you child care? A simple action like displaying a child's artwork shows that the kids' efforts and creations are praised and appreciated...just like at home.
8. Do you feel supported as a working parent? The best teachers should seem like part of your extended family. A good provider should help you feel confident in your decision to work or have time alone while your child is in their care.
9. Would you want to stay there all day? If the answer is no, then look for another arrangement. Your child shouldn't have to tolerate a situation that you would find unpleasant. After all, with the right provider, your child will thrive-and, in turn, so will you.

## Single Parenting

### Some Good Tips

1. Reassure your child of your love.
2. Make sure your child doesn't feel the blame for the breakup.
3. Answer all your child's questions honestly.
4. Help your child deal with anger.
5. Keep your promises.
6. Always be on time to pick up or drop off your child.
7. Make sure your kids are clean and ready when leaving with other parent.
8. Don't use your child as a scapegoat.
9. Don't talk about money issues with your child about the other spouse.
10. Don't talk to your child about dates your ex has had or is having.
11. Don't harp on rules at the other house.
12. Don't threaten your child to live at the other house.
13. Don't discuss with your child about possibly getting back together, now or in the future.

### Children

1. Don't need to know the details about the divorce.
2. Take care of yourself first.
3. Remember special days
4. Give your child memorabilia regarding history of your family
5. Join support groups to help you--Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Faith Based Groups, etc.
6. Go back to school
7. Have kids join groups at school or after school that will give them support and increase self-esteem
8. Help kids deal with anger, guilt, and loneliness.

### Remember to

1. Maintain a positive attitude
2. Work with kids on their fears
3. Get activities appropriate for children
4. Respect the child's mother
5. Don't let the child grow up to quickly
6. Always tell the truth
7. Maintain a positive attitude
8. Show lots of love to the child or children

Submitted by:  
Cheri Wontor  
Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility

