

# Parenting Connection

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## Parents and Children Are United Through Reading

At New Lisbon Correctional Institution (Wisconsin), a large percentage of the inmates are from either the Green Bay/Brown County area or the Milwaukee County area. Given the fact that NLCI is located approximately three hours from either city, many inmates who have children, do not have the opportunity to visit with them on a regular basis, if at all. The time and distance that separates children from their fathers can take a toll on the relationship between the two.

In an effort to help inmates reconnect with their children, NLCI has developed a program called United Through Reading. It is a two part program that uses reading as an avenue to help inmates recognize the importance of reading and to help inmates encourage their children to read. A guidebook was developed illustrating tips, ideas, and facts to help inmates use reading as a way to establish a common bond with their children.

The guidebook encourages each inmate to create a 30 page activity book for their children. An inmate can include types of poems to create, word finds, mazes, a family tree, certificates that recognizes the child's accomplishments in life or pages to color. Fathers may include an entry from their journals which they keep during their experience in the program.

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The Parenting Connection is a publication of the Parenting Special Interest Group and the Wisconsin Chapter of the Correctional Education Association.

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Using art software on a stand-alone computer, inmates have the ability to create each page from scratch, giving them the flexibility to customize anything from font type and size to various effects applied to photos that have been scanned into the computer. The software also provides over 200,000 clip-arts for the inmates to use. Once the book is completed, all the pages are printed out, the cover page is laminated, and the pages are bound together.

Upon completion of the activity book, each inmate then starts work on a DVD of himself reading books. Inmates may select from a library of children's books from authors like Dr Seuss to Beverly Cleary. Once the inmates are comfortable reading the books they have picked out, they schedule a time to sit in front of a wilderness backdrop and read their books into a digital camcorder. The inmates also provide some commentary during the reading asking their children questions or pointing out pictures, giving it a personal touch. From the camcorder, each book is transferred to DVD through a Digital Video Recorder. The DVD's are set up so that each book title is reflected on the navigation menu so the children can pick and choose which book they want their Dad to read to them. Each DVD is two hours in length, allowing inmates to read on average at least 15 books.

Once the DVD is complete, a label and jacket are created based off the cover of their activity book for the DVD and case. The DVD and activity book are packaged up together and sent to the children. The program is open to inmates who have children 11 years old and younger. All inmates who participate receive a group book that consists of selected pages from each individual's activity book. The class lasts approximately 6-8 weeks. A waiting list has already been established due to the popularity of the program.

By: Randy Scott  
New Lisbon Correctional Institution

## A Valuable Resource for Instructors

Valuable resources available to Parenting instructors are the Incarcerated Fathers Library and Children of Prisoners Library which are run by the Family and Corrections Network. From the two libraries, you can get copies of dozens of useful pamphlets for \$6.00 or you can go on line and download them for free. FCN also gives permission to copy the materials and use them in your parenting classes. The website is [www.fcnetwork.org](http://www.fcnetwork.org). The materials are available through the Incarcerated Fathers Library and Children of Prisoners Library at FCN, 32 Oak Grove Road, Palmyra, VA 22963, (434) 589-3036.

The materials are well written, easy to understand and are good discussion materials for parents. The pamphlets address how to tell your children that you are incarcerated, visitation, child custody and child support. There are other resources available for people working with incarcerated fathers.

by: Mitzi Soldner  
Fox Lake Correctional Institution (Wisconsin)



# Project Invites Men to Read-to-Me

The Read to Me Project at Redgranite (Wisconsin) Correctional Institution enables offenders to read to an important child in their life ---children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, younger siblings, etc. The men are able to read each month as appointments are available.

The men sign up by contacting the Chaplain. The inmate is given a *Preparation for Video Taping* hand-out. He selects a book to read from a library of recently donated gently used books. All books need to go through a security check. Only regular books are allowed. No batteries, spiral bindings, pop-up or pull tabs, or puffy covers are allowed.

The inmate either signs the book out (to practice reading) or a note is attached to the book and it is held by the Chaplain until taping occurs. The inmate is encouraged to take the book with him to practice and think of questions that he might ask a child when he reads it. There is a form that can accompany the book in case of a room search.

If an inmate needs help in selecting a book, the Chaplain is available. The Read to Me Project has an ample supply of books for younger children. Materials for upper elementary and high school kids are more difficult. For the older child, the inmate is encouraged to read something that he liked and explain to the child why. Of course, time allows only a part of a book to be read to the older child.

At the video appointment the inmate is asked to fill out a disbursement form that pays for the tape, the large envelope, and mailing. An average of four inmates can be taped every week. Because taping demands are heaviest at holidays, increased taping is done at these times and inmates are advised to tape way in advance. Inmates can make a tape for each of their children and send them to different addresses if the children are separated.

Taping requires a crew of three: a camera person (inmate), someone to do paperwork (Chaplain), and someone to help select a book (inmate).

After the video is made it is placed in an open addressed envelope and sent to security. Security looks at every tape for inappropriate messages, gang symbols, etc. Messages to other family members are NOT allowed. The inmates can also sing on tape. Security allows tapes to be done in Spanish, but the process takes longer to find someone to do the clearance on foreign speaking tapes. Each video ends up in the child's home within two weeks to a month.

Prior to taping the inmate is given this **Preparation for Video Taping** handout:

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❖ **Selecting a Book to Read**

- Think about what your child likes. The more that you know about your child, the better your choice of a book to read will be.
- Think about the things you liked at your child's age. You could select a book that you liked then.
- Allow your child to make a request from the books that we have available. Let us know if your child has favorites that we might be able to add to our selection.
- Use the five-finger rule for selecting a book that you are comfortable reading. If there are more than five words on a page that cause you to stumble when reading, choose another book.
- The maximum time on a tape is 20 minutes. You will want to have time for an introduction and a conclusion on your tape, as well as reading the story.
- If the book is too long to complete, you may need to read just a part of it, like one chapter.
- If the book is short, you may read two books. Only one book will be sent!
- Practice reading the book several times so that you know how long it will take you to read it on the tape.

❖ **Preparing an Introduction**

- Be yourself. Say "Hello", or "Hi". Use your child's or children's names when you begin.
- Tell them that this is a gift from Daddy, Dad or the name that you use for yourself.
- Include some conversation about things that you have enjoyed (together?) in the past.
- Share your feelings. "Daddy Loves You!" "Dad Misses You".
- Please make no promises to your child.
- You may talk about your absence, if you wish.
- Tell the child or children what you are going to be doing on the tape. Remember to tell the title of the book.
- Share why you chose this particular book. Why you like it. How it relates to the child's like or your life.
- Talk about the book. What to expect (just a little hint), things to be looking for as your read, special pictures, how it relates to the child's life.

❖ **Preparing a Conclusion**

- Encourage the child or children to watch the video often if they are missing you.
- Encourage them to read other books, go to the library, do their reading, homework, etc.
- Encourage them to do well at school, remember to listen to the teacher, do their lessons and ask for help if the need it. Tell them to have fun playing with their friends.
- Encourage them to write back to you. Tell them that you would like to see a picture or a drawing, or hear a story from them, especially something from the book or about another book that they've been reading.

❖ **Reading is FUN**

- Think about your appearance and your actions. You are on a stage, for your child!
- Use lots of expression.

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- Try different voices for difference characters.
- Dramatize the action by using soft and loud voices and all other kinds also.
- Ask some questions as you go along. Do you see Mom, Grandma or Grandpa? What are they doing? Can you spot the dog? He's hiding! Will you be going sledding this winter like the children in the book?
- Character names can be difficult. Just use the same name throughout the book.
- If you skip a page or get confused, calmly go back and redo the page or pages. Kids are accepting of these kinds of errors.

❖ **If You Have Extra Time** (as appropriate by age)

- Go through the ABC's with your child.
- Practice counting for them.
- Read them a poem.
- Sing them a song.
- Tell them a prayer.
- Give them any proper message that relates to cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.
- Urge them to stay in school

Please remember that being able to share some time with our children in this fashion is a privilege. Each tape will be reviewed by security, only to insure that our conduct is proper (no gang signs or inappropriate behavior). Please honor this request, so that we may continue to provide our children with these very positive messages. Thank you.

The **Goals and Benefits** of the Read to Me Project are to:

- Develop and maintain an emotional connection between an inmate and his children and family during incarceration.
- Help an inmate assume an aspect of the parenting role while incarcerated by reading to his children and encouraging reading as one of their activities
- Help prepare inmates for successful re-entry to family life and community upon release
- Learn to choose age-appropriate books for children
- Learn to gauge the level of interest children may have for different topics
- Improve parenting and reading skills

Inmates involved in the Read to Me program are taking direct action to enhance connections with their children and to prepare for being with them in the future. Research points to the value of parents and children reading together. Father's reading is an act of modeling positive behavior for the children that encourages them to do well in school.

As Chaplain Deborah Mejchar, the Read to Me Project coordinator, observes, "One must witness the individuals reading and speaking to their children to realize how special the readers could feel during this personal time with their child or children."



# HOME Program Helps Offenders Transition

At Redgranite (Wisconsin) Correctional Institution, Tamra Oman and Chaplain Deborah Mejchar have recently implemented a new program designed to help offenders to transition from incarcerated person to parent and partner.

The HOME Program, Helping Offenders Manage Effectively, is designed to assist offenders and their family members in having healthier, effective, realistic approaches during the transition period from incarceration to freedom. Its focus is to develop skills in communication, healthy celebration, and education for all participants. The goals are to gain knowledge of what to expect, address concerns, gain helpful tools, and gather resources and information to continue the momentum of becoming a healthy family after release.

The HOME Program consists of three sessions per group of participants: In Session 1, offenders get to know one another, share past family celebrations and future ideas, and identify concerns. Session 2 involves celebrating cultural diversity and sharing learning opportunities. During the session, each family rotates every 15 minute to experience various games, story telling, music, speakers, etc. The exercise is followed by a family time to discuss and share what they learned and what they appreciate about their family heritage or newfound understanding. Session 3 calls for the participants to role play and brainstorm previously identified concerns.



The HOME Program encourages offenders and family members to develop communication skills, celebrates family and community, provides informational resources, and attempts to educate individuals with the goal of producing higher success rates, reduced recidivism, and the breaking of the cycle of familial incarceration.

The HOME Program allows all of the participants to discuss their concerns, build on the positive, and plan for a more successful future for the family. Many offenders and family members are not prepared for this process. They all have ideas of “what it will be like,” but they hardly know each other after a long period of absence. This program is geared towards developing a realistic idea of what is to come and what the individual’s responsibilities are.



# Children and TV Violence

American children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily. Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Unfortunately, much of today's television programming is violent. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may:

- Become "immune" to the horror of violence
- Gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems.
- Imitate the violence they observe on television
- Identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers

Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Sometimes, watching a single violent program can increase aggressiveness. Children who view shows in which violence is very realistic, frequently repeated or unpunished, are more likely to imitate what they see. Children with emotional, behavioral, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence. The impact of TV violence may be immediately evident in the child's behavior or may surface years later, and young people can even be affected when the family atmosphere shows no tendency toward violence.

While TV violence is not the only cause of aggressive or violent behavior, it is clearly a significant factor.

Parents can protect children from excessive TV violence in the following ways:

- Pay attention to the programs their children are watching and watch some with them.
- Set limits on the amount of time they spend with TV; consider removing the TV set from a child's room
- Point out that although the actor has not actually been hurt or killed. Such violence in real life results in pain or death.
- Refuse to let children see shows known to be violent, and change the channel or turn the TV set when offensive material comes on, with an explanation of what is wrong with the program.
- Disapprove of the violent episodes in front of children, stressing the belief that such behavior is not the best way to resolve a problem.
- To offset peer pressure among friends and classmates, contact the other parents and agree to enforce similar rules about the length of time and type of program the children may watch.

Parents can also use these measures to prevent harmful effects from television in other areas such as racial or sexual stereotyping. The amount of time children watch TV, regardless of content, should be moderated because it decreases time spent on more beneficial activities such as reading, playing with friends, and developing hobbies. If parents have serious difficulties setting limits, or have ongoing concerns about how their child is reacting to television, they should contact a child and adolescent psychiatrist, psychologist or physician to address issues that are of concern.

from: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
submitted by: Cheri Wontor  
Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility



# “Last Name Last”

*The following article is by Jeremiah Gee. Jeremiah is the assessment coordinator for Pennsylvania College of Technology's School of Integrated Studies. He works at a local county prison through a grant housed by Mansfield University of Pennsylvania's Center for Lifelong Learning. This article is based on a case study for his master's thesis which researched the needs and opportunities available to inmates in rural county correctional facilities. He can be reached at [schoolaintsobad@yahoo.com](mailto:schoolaintsobad@yahoo.com) This article first appeared in the May/June 2005 issue of American Jails - the magazine of the American Jail Association.*

In a rural community, your last name often precedes you. After telling someone your name, you then have to explain to whom you are and are not related. In the Cowanesque Valley of north central Pennsylvania, one well-known last name belongs to Anthony. For the majority of his life, Tony's father has been in and out of county and state correctional facilities. One near-famous incident involved a car chase – perhaps common in Los Angeles, but not rural Pennsylvania. How Tony was affected is a description familiar to many in rural county prisons.



Early on, the incarceration of Tony's father led his parents to separate. His mother took primary care of the three children. Although his mother found a boyfriend, whom she married years later, Tony did not view this man as a father figure. The boyfriend was a drinker, and Tony identified him as "irresponsible." When Tony was in his early teens, the group moved to Tioga County, Pennsylvania. They were previously just over the New York border, also in a rural area. Tony found himself in a position of responsibility over his siblings, plus two more children from his mother and her boyfriend.

Tony found himself experiencing what he calls hatred. A word he uses, it was a reaction to not having a father figure. This translated into his "not caring" about school participation. He would purposefully behave in ways that were destructive. Thinking back about when he dropped out of school, which he did "because he could," he wishes his principal would have said, "Listen, Mister, you're going to school. I don't care what bad things you do." In this sense, he says he would have benefited from an authority figure that would "put their foot down" and make him go to school.

But that authority figure was in jail.

Having not finished school, Tony took a traveling roofing job. His reason for coming back to the area was to be with his girlfriend. The two led a transient, drug-subsided lifestyle for about a year. Throughout this period, he returned to his mother's house intermittently.

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A short time later, what Tony calls the “Elmira incident” occurred. Tony was arrested on a drug charge and held until posting bond. This was the first time Tony had a run-in with the law, as we say around here, and it created a crisis. Tony was following in his father’s footsteps – he had dropped out of school, he was on drugs, and he was in jail.

Shortly after being released, Tony learned he was going to be a father. This new responsibility, coupled with the terms of his bond obligation, led him to quit selling and using drugs. He describes this decision as being “the right thing to do.” Tony and his girlfriend settled-down on a property of their own and had “family time,” complete with a house-warming party and a baby shower. Tony was employed at a factory – a good job for someone in rural Pennsylvania with no diploma. In time the Elmira incident was resolved because Tony “has a good lawyer.”

But after about a year, Tony learned that his girlfriend (and now the mother of his son) was cheating on him, and he began what he calls his relapse into hatred. A flashback to his earlier drug sales and use, he lost his job for “not caring.” Tony was arrested but released on his own recognizance and then arrested again and incarcerated. This was due to him allegedly assaulting his girlfriend’s boyfriend. Tony marks it as a critical moment in his relapse. He summarizes, “The Brady Bunch fell apart.”

He was living up to his last name.

The arrest left Tony in quarantine. While there, Tony reflected on how he hated the fact that his father was not around. Tony assessed his life in terms of his greatest need, which was to become a father figure for his son. He took advantage of every programming opportunity in the jail. He made a few conclusions: life on the outside is better than on the inside – but being on the outside is not enough if you don’t have something to make you care.

One wonders if someone could have “made” Tony care or whether he had to learn it through experience. What role did A.A., GED, and church programs play? Do jails’ programs make better citizens? It is clear that some inmates think this. Researchers do, too, as cost analysis on correctional education shows that it is an efficient way to curb recidivism. At the very least, the programs play an important support role by helping people learn from their past rather than trying to outrun it. We all play an important role in individual success stories when we refuse to hold people to the standards set by their last names and when we believe that people truly can change.

In Tony’s case, he has turned his past into his greatest motivation. He contends that internal motivation is the key for breaking the cycle of incarceration. He successfully finished his GED and moved to a more prosperous region of the state. Out for nearly three years, he is very active in his son’s life, and remains dedicated to bettering himself – and his name – for the sake of his son.

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# Reach and Teach Parents on Early Brain Development

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families and Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health will be sponsoring a training seminar on early brain development on January 29, 2008, at the Hotel Mead Conference Center in Wisconsin Rapids, WI.

The **Reach and Teach Parents on Early Brain Development** training is designed for professionals working with parents. The focus is to provide ideas on how to communicate brain development to parents, better understand attachment, and help parents create secure attachment with their babies. The training will also give the participants information to better understand how a parent's own history of being parented and insecure attachment may affect current parenting, as well as the relationship with the parent educator.

*"If the child moves forward developmentally with unresolved attachment issues, she may develop pervasive feelings of isolation, anger, lack of self worth, or shame. She may have a deeply internalized sense that the world is not a safe place and that she can't fully trust anyone. She may be noticeably emotionally immature, have difficulties with social relationships, suffer from low self-esteem, or develop an inordinate need for control."*

---- Heidi Holman (adoptive mother)

This training offers information to help understand the parents you are working with. It also will provide ideas in how to provide hands on learning to teach brain development and how to work with the parent to provide the best for the child.

Presenters will be Janna Hack, LCSW Infant Mental Health Consultant with Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health and Deborah Schmid MS, Early Education Specialist with Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

Agenda topics for the training include:

- Early Brain Development : Ideas to Share with Parents
- Relationships Matter: Understanding the Impact of Attachment
- "Ghosts in the Nursery: Understanding and Building Relationships with Parents with Attachment Difficulties"
- "Ghosts in the Nursery: Understanding and Building Relationships with Parents with Attachment Difficulties" --- Application
- Q & A / Wrap- up

The registration fee is \$85. This includes lunch, breaks and all training materials. Materials will include a binder with Power Point handouts and supporting research articles. The registration deadline is January 22. There must be a minimum of 30 participants to be able to hold the training.

For registration information, email Deborah Schmid at [deborahschmid@wccf.org](mailto:deborahschmid@wccf.org) or phone 606-284-0580.



# Remember to Register for the Effective Black Parenting Seminar

As announced in the last issue of the *Parenting Connection* newsletter, the CEA's Parenting Special Interest Group has contracted with Kimberly C. Porter of the University of Wisconsin - Extension System to offer a one-day training seminar on Effective Black Parenting. Joining Kimberly to provide the training will be Barbara E. White, Community Educator; Terri Birt, City of Milwaukee Health Department; and Kim Tolbert, Next Door Foundation.

The Effective Black Parenting Seminar will be held on March 3, 2008 at the Quality Inn in Brookfield, Wisconsin. The seminar will begin at 9:00 and end around 3:30. Continental breakfast will be available from 8:00 to 9:00. Lunch and break refreshments will be furnished.

With growing interest in evidence based prevention programs comes an increased concern about the cultural appropriateness of programs for families of various cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. In this workshop, participants will become familiar with the Effective Black Parenting Program (EBP).

EBP is an award winning, research validated, parent tested, and culturally affirming program. Created in the 1970's; it is the first parenting skill building program that respects and honors the unique history and traditions of people of African descent. Additionally, the program teaches its skills in a manner that is both culturally sensitive and culturally affirming. Effective Black Parenting focuses on ways to encourage achievement and healthy development for Black children.

For more information on the Effective Black Parenting Seminar or to register, go the [www.ceawisconsin.org](http://www.ceawisconsin.org) website and click on the November/December 2007 issue of the *Parenting Connection* newsletter or contact [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com).

Early registration before February 1, 2008 is \$25 for CEA members and \$50 for non-CEA members. After February 1, 2008, late registration is \$50 for CEA members and \$75 for non-CEA members.

Those wishing to arrive the night before may reserve a room at the rate of \$59.95 by calling the Quality Inn - Brookfield directly at 262-785-0500. Tell the agent that you are attending the Effective Black Parenting Seminar.

## Upcoming Training

Charles E. Stuart, President and Founder of the National Incarcerated Parents and Families Network, has announced that his organization will be hosting a training on the curriculum, "Parenting From Behind Bars" in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on April 17-18, 2008.

Cost of training will be \$375.00 per person. This does not include transportation, food or lodging.

The workshop will include training from experienced trainers, trained in establishing programs in correctional facilities and working one-on-one and in group settings with incarcerated parents and families.

More information about the upcoming training is posted on the National Incarcerated Parents and Families Network website, [www.incarceratedparents.org](http://www.incarceratedparents.org). Click on "Events."



# Editorial- Mary Knox

Happy New Year! 2008 has arrived and we will be reminded everyday from now until November that we are electing a new president. I am not going to launch into a plug for my favorite candidate or anything like that but I do feel that we need to remember the little children when we vote this year.

We work with many individuals who did not have a chance at healthy brain development from the day they were born. As parent educators, we should be looking at ways to advocate for the children in the birth to three-year-old range. They can't vote, so where is their voice? Building more prisons is not the answer. We have to get to the front end. So my soapbox would be for the at risk infants who leave the hospitals everyday with no intervention or poorly funded intervention programs. It is just something to think about when you are listening to the debates and looking at all the choices. If I had the chance to ask the candidates, a question this is what I would want to know. I wonder which candidate could answer the tough questions about the little children. Here is one of my favorite quotes from the great child advocate, Marian Wright Edelman. "We are willing to spend the least amount of money to keep a kid at home, more to put him in a foster home and the most to institutionalize him." Let us all be advocates for the children in this election year.

There are many great training opportunities this year. I hope to connect with you there.

Mary K. Knox

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