

Parenting Connection

Volume 7 Issue 3

November/December 2010

Parenting Workshop Highlights Critical Windows of Opportunity

On September 27, thirteen parenting educators gathered at Moraine Park Technical College (Wisconsin) to learn about the crucial role parents play in the brain development of their children.

Presenting the workshop was Deborah McNelis, a former early childhood education teacher and founder of braininsights™. Deborah created braininsights to help parents apply brain development concepts to real life situations. In her workshop, "It Takes Attention to Change the Brain: Helping Offenders Become Better Parents," she cited the latest scientific research that demonstrates a child's brain is physically "wired" by genetic factors as well as the experiences they have early in life. Deborah pointed out that the brain adapts itself to repeated experiences, whether they are negative or positive.

Over 90% of brain development occurs in the pre-school years. Optimal brain development "isn't all that complicated," Deborah says. "It's positive interaction with the adults in the child's life and with real objects, using all of the senses. That's the way the brain is going to develop best."

There are critical windows of opportunity for different types of brain development. The critical window of opportunity for visual development is birth to 6 months, for language development is birth to 3 years, for math development is 1 to 4 years, and for foreign language development is birth to 5 years

How a child views the world is heavily influenced during the critical window of opportunity for emotional development that occurs in the first 18 month of life. Key at this time is the attachment that the infant forms with the caregiver. Attachment leads to the ability to delay gratification, problem solve, have empathy for others, and create a secure sense of self.

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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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Each workshop participant received one of the braininsights Activity Packets developed by Deborah and graphic designer Nate Van Dyke. Each of the 40-card packets has ideas and activities to translate early childhood brain research into practical methods for parents to help their children grow. There is a specific packet for each of the child's first five years.

Deborah assessed the workshop as follows: "It was such a pleasure to have the opportunity to present at this event. The professionals attending are very knowledgeable and committed to the valuable work they are involved with. Through the presentation of brain information, insightful discussions resulted. It is apparent that families will benefit through applying the knowledge and concepts to the everyday work of these dedicated educators. I very much enjoyed the day!"

More information about Deborah's presentations and the Activity Packets may be found on the www.braininsightsonline.com website or by emailing deb@braininsightsonline.com.

Recently Deborah was honored by having an article about her written in *M Magazine*. It can be accessed on line at http://www.gmtoday.com/content/m_west/2010/September/mwest_0910_26.asp

This parenting workshop was the second sponsored by the CEA Parenting Special Interest Group and CEA-Wisconsin. We are hoping to make these parenting workshops an annual event. Anyone with ideas for future workshops may contact Jerry Bednarowski at jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com.

What Can You Do to Help the Children of Inmates or Parolees?

Have you ever been to the visiting room of your institution or parole agent building? When my children were small, I hated to take them to the doctor and let them play with the toys that every sick child in town had sucked or sneezed on. I asked our doctor to make sure the toys were washed on a regular basis. I try to make sure the same is done in our visiting area.

I have asked the person in charge of our institution visiting area to have the inmate janitors wash the toys on a regular basis. Every time we get new janitors in the area, I make the request again. I go through the toys and books and throw away toys that are broken, cracked or have sharp edges on them. I find toys/books at rummage sales to replace things that have to be thrown away. I have also written to book companies and they have donated books for our visiting area.

I have asked that the carpeting be removed from the children's area so the marble floor under it can be kept clean easier. The carpeting is old and dirty and we do not have the money to replace the carpeting for the whole visiting area.

I have also checked the changing tables in the rest rooms. The belts need to be replaced on occasion and they need to be sanitized.

I believe that it is difficult enough for the children to be raised in broken homes. I would not want these same children to be hurt more by dirty or broken toys while they are in our areas. It is all well and good that we teach about parenting skills. But, if we do not treat the children well when they are with us, then we have not done our part in modeling what it means to be a good parent.

by: Mitzi Soldner, Fox Lake Correctional Institution (Wisconsin)



Resources Available from the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The mission of the Annie E. Casey Foundation is “Helping vulnerable kids and families succeed.”

To accomplish their mission, the foundation created the Casey Foundation Knowledge Center comprised of several Special Interest Areas containing resources published and/or funded by Casey that you may download. One of the Special Interest Areas is “Children with Incarcerated Parents.” Here are some of the Featured Publications which address the impact of incarceration on families and children:

Focus on Children with Incarcerated Parents: An Overview of the Research Literature, 2007

This report provides an overview of major research findings on children whose parents are incarcerated as a means of further informing this developing area of research, practice, and policy. The findings and policy and program suggestions offered in this synthesis are based primarily on research published during the last 20 years.

Partnerships between Corrections and Child Welfare: Collaboration for Change, Part Two, 2001

The criminal justice system interacts with many of the same families involved in the child welfare system; while it makes sense that these systems have official contact with each other, they often do not. This document describes ways that the two systems can work together to improve and strengthen family and community bonds.

Broken Bonds: Understanding & Addressing the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents, 2009

This report by the Urban Institute reviews the current research on children with incarcerated parents, and offers recommendations on how to reduce the negative impact of parental incarceration. The authors pay particular attention to the influence that supportive relationships with the incarcerated parent and other adults has on children’s outcomes.

Kinship Care when Parents Are Incarcerated: What We Know, What We Can Do, 2009

This paper explores the role of kinship care for children of parents currently incarcerated; examining the involvement of the child welfare system, and describing what can be done to develop more compassionate social policies and programs geared toward this population.

Children with Incarcerated Parents: A List of Selected Resources, 2008

This resource guide, last updated in June 2008, lists selected citations of documents and resources in four categories: general, research, program and practice, and policy and state/local level activity. While the guide is not meant to be inclusive of all relevant information available on children with incarcerated parents, it represents informative work in the topic areas addressed.

Children of Incarcerated Parents Fact Sheet, 2008

This fact sheet includes data on incarceration of adults, its affects on children and families left behind, and how it affects children and youth with respect to foster care. The fact sheet was produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and Marguerite Casey Foundation.

Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Children of Incarcerated Parents: Views from Mentors, 2008

To better understand the experiences and needs of children with incarcerated parents, Urban Institute researchers collaborated with mentors from Big Brothers, Big Sisters organizations in Baltimore, Maryland; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Washington, D.C. Researchers were able to gather qualitative data through the use of focus groups with the mentors of children whose parents are incarcerated. The group discussions focused on the children’s living situations, relationships with their parents, and emotional and behavioral outcomes. Findings from the discussions indicate considerable variation between children with incarcerated mothers and those with incarcerated fathers.

Children and Families with Incarcerated Parents: Exploring Development in the Field and Opportunities for Growth, 2008

Children and families with incarcerated parents not only face the trauma of loss, but also a range of economic and social conditions that result from incarceration. Concerned about the vulnerability of this population, the Annie E. Casey Foundation began an exploration of the nature and scope of this issue and the gaps that need to be filled. This report provides a summary of the Foundation’s findings, a listing of the Foundation’s recent investments in this area, and synthesizes the learnings into potential opportunities for the field at large.



Research Examines the Price of Prison for Children

It comes as no surprise that many children suffer when a parent is behind bars. But as rates of incarceration grew over the past 30 years, researchers were slow to focus on the collateral damage to children. The best estimate says that at any one time, 1.7 million (about 2.3 percent) of all American children have a parent in prison, says Julie Poehlmann, a professor in the School of Human Ecology and investigator at the Waisman Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "By age 14, more than half of black children with a low-education parent, will have an imprisoned parent," she says.

About 10 years ago, the problem finally began to spark interest from social scientists, Poehlmann says. "School personnel and child welfare personnel are now seeing more and more children who have a current or past incarcerated parent. There is a greater awareness of the volume, and greater need to understand what's going on. What are the risks, what are the outcomes, and how can we better help these children," Poehlmann says.

Although a definitive cause-and-effect relationship has not been established, children of incarcerated parents tend to have more arrests, and more problems with behavior, relationships, school, and substance abuse. "It's all the things you would expect," says Poehlmann. Problems are particularly acute when the mother is in jail or prison. "It's more likely that the child will move out of the house and be placed with grandparents," she says. "They are more likely to change schools and have a higher risk of substance abuse. The father is also likely to be incarcerated."

Poehlmann, who has studied mothers, substitute caregivers and children in Milwaukee, Racine, Green Bay, Beloit and other parts of Wisconsin, finds that a strong, close attachment with the alternative caregiver can mitigate the harm of incarceration. "I don't find it surprising how important the caregiver is. In the past, interventions tended to focus on the parent, with little or no focus on the caregiver, the quality of the home environment, or the nature of the attachment between child and caregiver; yet these are all critical to how the child is doing," she says.

Julie indicates that, despite the risks, 25 to 30 percent of children escape the worst harm. "When I look at the factors that facilitate resilience, secure attachment appears to be protective," she says. In one of her studies, kids aged 9 to 14 who had a positive relationship with a caregiver had fewer behavior problems six months later. Although it's assumed that contact with an imprisoned parent will help the child, Poehlmann finds that this is not always true. "Visits when the parent is behind Plexiglas are not always positive. Alternative means of contact, like letters, may be more positive for kids who are traumatized by prison visits," she says.

School districts are belatedly trying to address the extra needs of these children. Incarcerated parents are "one reason why districts like Milwaukee are having so many problems with truancy and graduation rates. There is probably a huge proportion of kids having these problems – the parents are incarcerated – and yet the school district may never learn of that fact," she says.

The long-term picture is bleak, Poehlmann adds. "Children of incarcerated parent are at least two and a half times more likely to be incarcerated themselves. Just imagine the scale of the crisis in another 10 or 15 years. It's overwhelming," she says.

Julie has been getting some attention for her work on the children of incarcerated parents, including serving as editor of a special issue on the subject in the journal *Attachment and Human Development* and a forthcoming book. But she says, "I wish this area hadn't exploded. I wish this problem didn't exist."

For more information on this research, contact Julie Poehlmann at poehlmann@waisman.wisc.edu .



Impacts on the Family during Reentry

In making the transition back into the community, former inmates turn to their spouses, parents, siblings, grandparents, and other family members for assistance. These family members become the 'front line' of reentry, providing former inmates with critical material and emotional support including shelter, food, clothing, leads for jobs, and guidance in staying sober or avoiding criminal behavior.

As difficult as the period of incarceration is on families, an offender's return home presents new challenges. In their publication, *Engaging Offenders' Families in Reentry*, author: Margaret diZerega, Vera Institute of Justice and editors: Madeline M. Carter, Center for Effective Public Policy and Rachelle Giguere, Center for Effective Public Policy list conditions which contribute to the strain on many families:

- Financial hardships from supporting an additional family member who may not be able to contribute to the household income.
- Relationship problems or interpersonal conflicts due to the offender's return to the household, such as dealing with the emotional concerns of a family member who may have been previously victimized by the offender, or strained relationships between the offender and children who may not understand why their parent was absent.
- Changes in the family dynamic upon the offender's return, such as new patterns of authority, or changes in the family composition since the offender went to prison.
- Feelings of anxiety, anger, frustration, disappointment, or resentment if the offender begins or returns to using drugs or alcohol, or to criminal behavior while living in the community.
- Taking on new responsibilities as a result of the offender's criminal justice status; for instance, family members may be expected to talk with parole officers, assist in monitoring whether the offender is following parole conditions, or install a home phone line for an electronic monitoring device.

In addition to the *Engaging Offenders' Families in Reentry* publication, the Center for Effective Public Policy and its partners, the Urban Institute and the Carey Group, developed a series of tools to assist correctional staff in specific areas of their reentry work. The final products of this work include eleven Coaching Packets in three series. These Coaching Packets offer practical value beyond the jurisdictions involved in this initiative and are available to criminal justice professionals and their partners interested in enhancing their strategies for reducing recidivism and improving offender outcomes.

To download copies of the Coaching Packets, visit the Center's website at <http://www.cepp.com/coaching.htm>. To obtain further information on the use or content of any of the Coaching Packets contact:

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Brain Facts to Be a Regular Feature

On her blog <http://braininsights.blogspot.com>, Deborah McNelis posts information on the importance of brain development in the early years and how easy it is to provide stimulating activities for children. With Deborah's permission, starting with this issue, we will be including Brain Facts in future newsletters. For the complete information, go to Deborah's blogspot. This issue's Brain Fact is:

What babies know about numbers?

Back in the 20th century, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget would have said they know nothing at all. But today's cognitive scientists have overturned the old ideas.

New experimental research reveals a fascinating new world of baby cognition, one in which babies can

- recognize the approximate difference between two numbers
- keep precise track of small numbers, and
- do simple subtraction and addition problems.

Moreover, when babies perform these feats they activate the same parts of the brain that are associated with mathematical thinking in adults.



For Black Children, Daunting Divides in Achievement and Family Life

The following is an editorial written by George Will on Sunday, August 29, 2010.

Various figures denote vexing social problems. They include 10,000 (the number of new baby boomers eligible for Social Security and Medicare every day), 10.2 percent (what the unemployment rate would be if 1.2 million discouraged workers had not recently stopped looking for jobs), \$9.9 trillion (the Government Accountability Office calculation of the gap between the expected revenue and outlays for state and local governments during the next 50 years), \$76.4 trillion (the GAO's similar estimate of the federal government's 75-year fiscal shortfall).

Remedies for these problems can at least be imagined. But America's tragic number – tragic because it is difficult to conceive remedial policies – is 70 percent. This is the portion of African American children born to unmarried women. It may explain what puzzles Nathan Glazer.

Writing in the *American Interest*, Glazer, a sociology professor emeritus at Harvard, considers it a "paradox" that the election of Barack Obama "coincided with the almost complete disappearance from American public life of discussion of the black condition and what public policy might do to improve it." This, says Glazer, is the black condition: Employment prospects for young black men worsened even when the economy was robust. By the early 2000s, more than a third of all young black non-college men were under the supervision of the corrections system. More than 60 percent of black high school dropouts born since the mid-1960s go to prison. Mass incarceration blights the prospects of black women seeking husbands. So does another trend noted by sociologist William Julius Wilson: "In 2003-2004, for every 100 bachelor's degrees conferred on black men, 200 were conferred on black women."

Because changes in laws and mores have lowered barriers, the black middle class has been able to leave inner cities, which have become, Glazer says, "concentrations of the poor, the poorly educated, the unemployed and unemployable." High out-of-wedlock birthrates mean a constantly renewed cohort of adolescent males without male parenting, which means disorderly neighborhoods and schools. Glazer thinks it is possible that for some young black men, "acting white" – trying to excel in school – is considered "a betrayal of their group culture." This severely limits opportunities in an increasingly service-based economy where working with people matters more than working with things in manufacturing.

Now, from the Educational Testing Service, comes a report about ["The Black-White Achievement Gap: When Progress Stopped,"](#) written by Paul E. Barton and Richard J. Coley. It examines the "startling" fact that most of the progress in closing the gap in reading and mathematics occurred in the 1970s and '80s. This means "progress generally halted for those born around the mid-1960s, a time when landmark legislative victories heralded an end to racial discrimination."

Only 35 percent of black children live with two parents, which partly explains why, while only 24 percent of white eighth-graders watch four or more hours of television on an average day, 59 percent of their black peers do. (Privileged children waste their time on new social media and other very mixed blessings of computers and fancy phones.) Black children also are disproportionately handicapped by this class-based disparity: By age 4, the average child in a professional family hears about 20 million more words than the average child in a working-class family and about 35 million more than the average child in a welfare family – a child often alone with a mother who is a high school dropout.

After surveying much research concerning many possible explanations of why progress stopped, particularly in neighborhoods characterized by a "concentration of deprivation," the ETS report says: "It is



very hard to imagine progress resuming in reducing the education attainment and achievement gap without turning these family trends around – i.e., increasing marriage rates, and getting fathers back into the business of nurturing children." And "It is similarly difficult to envision direct policy levers" to effect that.

So, two final numbers: Two decades, five factors. Two decades have passed since Barton wrote "America's Smallest School: The Family." He has estimated that about 90 percent of the difference in schools' proficiencies can be explained by five factors: the number of days students are absent from school, the number of hours students spend watching television, the number of pages read for homework, the quantity and quality of reading material in the students' homes – and, the most important, the presence of two parents in the home. Public policies can have little purchase on these five, and least of all on the fifth.

Raise a Bookworm

In order to foster a love of reading, show your children reading is fun. Even if your kid is a good reader, spend time reading things they enjoy. Reading aloud is a good start, especially when you let your child pick the books they want to read. Not only reading aloud, but also discussing the characters and the setting helps the child delve further into the true meaning of the book.

How do you raise a lifelong reader? An author of the book, *Reading Together: Everything You Need to Know to Raise a Child Who Loves to Read*, encourages reading aloud and together often. Reading drops significantly at the age of nine according to a recent Scholastic Study. Regardless of your child's age continue to read together and often. Make it a regular habit.

Use these three reading strategies and you will eventually have a Bookworm.

1. Pick books in their interest area.
2. Listen to audio books. It is wonderful in the car, train or airplane.
3. Revisit favorites – it might be a great time to discuss the plot or areas they didn't understand the first time around.

submitted by: Cheri Wontor, Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility

Books for Parents

Here are some books for parents available from the US Department of Education:

- Beaty, Janice J. *Building Bridges with Multicultural Picture Books: For Children 3-5*. Prentice-Hall, 1996. Contains a listing of selected multicultural picture books for young children. Includes activities to do with children that are based on the books listed.
- Butler, Dorothy. *Babies Need Books: Sharing the Joy of Books with Children from Birth to Six*. Heinemann, 1998. Discusses the importance of reading to young children and gives summaries of books by age level.
- Hall, Susan L., and Moats, Louisa C. *Straight Talk About Reading: How Parents Can Make a Difference During the Early Years*. NTC Publishing Group. 1998. Provides practical advice, games and activities, and lists of children's books and resources that parents can use to help their children read.
- Muse, Daphne (Ed). *The New Press Guide to Multicultural Resources for Young Readers*. The New Press, 1997. Includes reviews of hundreds of children's books from a wide variety of backgrounds.
- Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Penguin, 2001. Discusses the importance of reading aloud to children. Includes a "Treasury of Read-Alouds" — hundreds of recommended books annotated by age and grade level.
- Also check-out these informative web sites:
 - Children's Software Revue: <http://www.childrensoftware.com>
 - Family Education Network: <http://www.familyeducation.com>
 - Kidsource: <http://www.kidsource.com>
 - Parent Soup: <http://www.parentsoup>



Dear Reader:

The buzz word within Corrections today is Reentry. As a teacher in Adult Basic Education, I am finding that college seems like such a far away place for many of our students. However, I am finding more and more of our students are concentrating on GED and basic skills and getting excited about it.

For those wanting to go beyond the GED, the mind boggling experience is more than most of them wish to tackle. In assisting them with those goals, I try to simplify the college entry tasks. Having technical college catalogs on my Ed Pod cart, I find more of them searching through them and asking questions, what if . . . ?

We want to open up their horizons and make college a reality for as many of them as we can. Recently, I found a very helpful guide which makes the college entry process a bit easier and I share this with you because it is such a handy tool for those who wish to go this route. Utilize as you wish!

Back to School: A Guide to Continuing Your Education after Prison. Spring 2008 – Prisoner Reentry Institute John Jay College, The City University of New York, Criminal Justice Department.

Cheri Wontor, Editor

For old issues of the *Parenting Connection* newsletter, go to www.ceawisconsin.org

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