

Parenting Connection

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The Connections Project

Nationwide, over ten million children have parents who have been imprisoned at some time in their lives. And the numbers are growing. In fact, the amount of children with a father in prison has grown by 77 percent since 1991 (1). In examining the prisoner population, you will find that on average, 92% of incarcerated parents are fathers (2).

The Connections Project is an initiative that focuses on changing the outcomes for children and families by engaging fathers for successful reentry. Research shows that family and community connections are key to reducing recidivism. In order to foster these connections, it is imperative that fathers be given:

- a context to heal from their “father wounds”
- a powerful, compelling, and motivating vision that they have a unique and irreplaceable role in their child’s life
- skills that help them succeed in this role—“it is hard to be what you didn’t see”

This is precisely what the Connections Project seeks to accomplish. The Connections Project was funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and administered by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) and ran from January 2010 through July 2011.

Here are some project highlights:

- ✓ 263 people from 13 states and the New York City D.O.C. have received training on the InsideOut Dad™ program, which is designed to help inmate fathers strengthen relationships with their children before they are released. These states include Delaware, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont.
- ✓ Four state D.O.C.’s, along with one major city, have decided to formally endorse the InsideOut Dad™ program. These include Delaware, South Carolina, Michigan, Vermont, and New York City. This brings the total to 23 states along with New York City that have standardized or have formally

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partnered with National Fatherhood Initiative to use InsideOut Dad™ as a preferred fatherhood program for incarcerated men.

- ✓ The following resources were created and are now available for free on the Connections Project website (www.connectionsproject.org):
 - A video featuring stories of successful reentry — powerful case studies on the impact of fatherhood programming that you can use to **inspire funders, inmates, and ex-offenders** (features former inmate Troy Gaines)
 - A Best Practice Guide with successful reentry tips and research you can use now to **strengthen proposals and enhance reentry efforts when working with fathers**
 - A brochure with tips to connect dads who are ex-offenders with their families after release
 - Access to no-cost expert advice to train your staff on engaging fathers for successful reentry through powerful, recorded, on-demand webinars

As you can see, The Connections Project has done a lot to nationally build momentum about the importance of engaging fathers for successful reentry. And rest assured that individual lives are being greatly impacted by what is happening. The following testimony comes from one of the inmate fathers that went through the InsideOut Dad™ program as part of the Connections Project.

“Once you lose outside contact, you lose hope. Hope is the only thing that keeps you going in here. InsideOut Dad woke me up. This program has helped me get back in touch with my kids.”

As a result of this father’s participation in the InsideOut Dad™ program, he was able to re-establish a relationship with his daughter and ex-wife after having no contact with them for 15 years!

Indeed, life transformations have taken place through the Connections Project and other efforts that the National Fatherhood Initiative is undertaking! Fathers are reconnecting with their children, families are being restored and new legacies are being established for the next generation.

For more information on this project and the resources that you can use to engage fathers for successful reentry, please visit www.connectionsproject.org. And for more information on the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), please visit www.fatherhood.org.

(1) Glaze & Maruschak. (2008). Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

(2) Glaze & Maruschak.

by: Michael J. Yudt
Director of National Programming
National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI)

Sharing Favorites Fosters Connections

Because I love you and want to be the best father possible, I want to learn more about you. Please help me out by completing this worksheet and giving it back to me!

Love, Your Dad

This is the invitation that the National Fatherhood Initiative suggests fathers give to their children. It is a great conversation starter that can be used through the mail or during visits.

The packet of materials titled, *Igniting Father-Child Relationships: Sharing Favorites Fosters Connections*, may be found at www.fatherhood.org. It includes separate worksheets that may be used with elementary-



aged children or teens. It also includes a worksheet for fathers to open communication with their children by helping them to get to know their dad.

Here is how the National Fatherhood Initiative suggests that fathers and parenting instructors use this resource.

Instructions for Dads:

- This tool is intended to help your children get to know you better and feel a deeper sense of connection to who you are. There is a portion you, the father, will fill out and a portion your children will fill out.
- Included with this resource are three age-appropriate worksheets. One is for children in elementary school, another for teenagers, and the last one is for you — Dad.
- Please fill out a separate sheet on yourself for each child that you have.
- Ask each of your children to fill out the appropriate worksheet. Then have them give or send it back to you. When sharing these worksheets, emphasize to your child that you love them, and because of that love, you want to be the best father possible. In order to do that, it's important for you to know what they like and don't like, and to constantly be learning other interesting facts about them.
- Dads, once you receive the completed worksheets, use them to jump start a conversation with your children, plan an activity, write a letter to them, etc. You will feel more confident when interacting with your children now that you have insight into the type of person your child is becoming.
- National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) encourages you to have each of your children update this worksheet at least once per year. Likes and dislikes are always changing and it will be important for you to keep up! Likewise, you may also want to send your children periodic updates on your "Favorites."
- NFI hopes you find this resource helpful in fostering a deeper connection between you and your children. As you use this tool to strengthen your relationships with your children, please share your experiences by sending us an email at info@fatherhood.org. We also encourage you to visit www.fatherhood.org to sign up for our weekly Dad Email which offers tips and information on how to stay connected with your children throughout the year. If you do not have internet access, we would encourage you to work with someone who can access the web. In addition to having this person send us your feedback, he or she can sign up to receive the Dad Email on your behalf and print out a hard copy for you to read weekly.
- Thanks and all the best as you strive to be the best father possible to your children!

Instructions for Those Who Are Working with Dads:

- First, read the instructions above for dads to gain insight into the purpose of this tool and how it can best be used. Once you read the instructions for dads, you will have a better sense of how you can "coach" dads on the most effective ways to use this resource.
- This tool can be especially helpful for dads that are separated from their children for an extended period of time. This resource, however, is sure to benefit any father, even ones living at home with their children. Please use it with all fathers, regardless of their circumstance! We would also like your feedback on this resource—please email us at info@fatherhood.org. And don't forget to make use of the Dad Email when working with fathers. You can sign up for that at www.fatherhood.org.

Submitted by: Margaret Done

R. E. Ellsworth Correctional (Wisconsin) Center

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



Brain Initiative: Is Some Stress Good for Children?

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, in issues of this newsletter, we are including Brain Initiatives from her blog. For the complete information, go to Deborah's BlogSpot. For more Information on brain development or easy activities you can do with your child to promote brain development visit www.braininsightsonline.com.

This issue's Brain Initiative is: Is Some Stress Good for Children?

Are you sometimes stressed? Of course the answer is yes! We experience some level of stress every day. As adults we have learned techniques in dealing with the stress we experience.

Because children still have immature brains, they are learning how to develop these techniques. It is through daily experiences that they have the opportunity to learn and develop strong connections for this skill in the thinking areas of the brain.

I am thrilled to share this guest post from Dr. Dave Walsh. It is one that gives parents and educators valuable information and guidance on this important topic. Rescuing children from stress or letting them handle it on their own is decision caring adults involved with children face every day. Dr. Walsh helps to relieve your stress about it with his valuable article. Enjoy!

Children and Stress: Too Hot, Too Cold or Just Right?



It's not easy to watch our kids experience stress and disappointment. Resisting the urge to swoop in and "fix" things for our kids can take every ounce of self-control that we have. This instinct is important since prolonged stress can be damaging and traumatic for kids. Chronic or intense stress can negatively impact memory, learning, and physical and mental health. Sometimes it is absolutely critical that we intervene.

But this doesn't mean that all stress is bad. Good stress can be energizing and motivating. Unfortunately, our ideas about stress and children have gotten so skewed that ANY stress has gotten a bad rap. This has led too many parents down the wrong path. As opposed to equipping children with the tools to navigate and negotiate stress, many parents have focused all of their energy shielding them from it.

All of us adults know that life can deliver a fair amount of stress and disappointment. How can we expect our kids to ultimately be able to handle this if they have never had any practice? Kids need some stress to develop their psychological muscles of resilience, stamina, determination, commitment, and perseverance. These are all qualities they need to succeed in their schools and relationships and, ultimately, in their communities and careers. If they don't build up these psychological muscles, they'll end up being emotionally flabby.



We want our kids to be able to handle adversity and to grow into adults who can bounce back from difficult times, challenges, and even tragedy. Resilience is the quality that enables them to do that. The catch is that kids don't develop this quality automatically; we have to teach them. For many of us it is easier to race to the rescue or lower the expectations than to raise our kids' discomfort level. We would be wiser to learn when we need to encourage, when to help, and when to stay out, step back and let our kids' flex their emotional muscles.

Here are some practical tips for how to nurture:

- Relax. If you're not having fun, you may be pushing your kids too hard.
- Allow kids time for free play. It's a great natural way for children to learn how to manage their behavior and resolve conflict.
- Praise your child, but be sure to make the praise authentic and meaningful. In other words, connect praise with wholehearted efforts and actions.
- Provide care and support, but don't always swoop in to bail your child out of a difficult situation.
- Help your child process the situation afterwards. "What did you learn? How did it make you feel to resolve that conflict? What might you do differently next time?"
- Validate your child's frustration and acknowledge when something is difficult. "It makes sense that you are frustrated; geometry can be really challenging. I am really proud that you are sticking with it though. I can't solve this for you, but why don't you explain to me what you've done so far."
- Be patient with your child's efforts. You may be able to do a better or faster job of something, but your child loses the opportunity to learn when you take over.
- Have clear and high expectations for your child's behavior.
- Help your children build friendships and make connections by teaching them how to manage their own behavior and emotional impulses.
- Expect children to do their chores and participate in the life and work of the family.
- Back up teachers and schools. Fighting with teachers to boost your child's grade isn't doing anyone any favors. If you have a real concern about your child's performance schedule an individual meeting and come up with a plan together.
- Encourage your kids to volunteer and help out others.

Do you have other tips for nurturing resilience in children? We'd love to hear them.

New Editor Assumes Duties

As is the procedure for this newsletter, each July a new editor for the *Parenting Connection* assumes her/his duties. Beginning with this issue, Barb Rasmussen will be the new editor.

Barb Rasmussen has been teaching parenting classes at Racine Correctional Institution for over 18 years. Her belief that dads play a vital role in the lives of their children, but may not always have the tools to provide the best practices to do so, motivates her to keep parenting a priority.

In addition to parenting classes, Barb teaches English as Second Language and the reading and writing components of the 5.09 HSED option. She also supervises the Father Read Program.

If you would like to contact Barb or submit an article for inclusion in the next issue of the *Parenting Connection*, her email address is barbara.rasmussen@wisconsin.gov.

To join CEA go to: www.ceanational.org



Help Your Students Prepare Their Kids for the Workforce

CareerWise by Tailwag Studio publishes creative career exploration resources that help parents, teachers and mentors prepare kids for entering the workforce. It was founded by two former Human Resources marketing professionals who want to share their behind-the-scenes insights and information about the employment world from an employer's perspective. The following article was published by Co-Owner Susan Schneider on their blog: www.GetCareerWise.com/blog4. Their website is www.GetCareerWise.com.

Feel free to pass these tips on to your students who have children at an age where they are starting to think about jobs and their education.

10 Easy Ways to Help Prepare Kids for Joining the Workforce

Lively, valuable conversations that will help kids in everything they do in life can take place around the dinner table or BBQ, around a campfire, on a roadtrip or even while hiking and biking. Jobs and “hire education” are hot topics right now — make them fun, engaging and relevant for your kids this summer!

Here are some tips for how to get started:

- 1) Share with them what you like about your job or responsibilities — not just the financial rewards but the satisfaction you get from different aspects of it. Discuss your career dreams and how you did (or did not) pursue them. Be honest about the things you like about your job, your goals for the future and how you plan to attain those goals.
- 2) Take notice of your kids' innate talents and interests; comment and encourage their development. Explain how specific strengths relate to specific jobs. Look for attributes such as leadership and negotiation skills, detail orientation, mediation and conflict resolution skills or analytical and problem solving abilities. Praise these talents and help your child investigate careers that would utilize them.
- 3) When you assign responsibilities around the house, draw parallels between how your child executes them and how that skill could be valued in the workplace. For example, if your son or daughter never forgets to take out the trash, praise her reliability, punctuality and teamwork. If your son never forgets to feed the dog, applaud his maturity, sense of responsibility, compassion and nurturing.
- 4) Instigate lively discussions with friends and family about the jobs they've had in their lives, their dreams, aspirations, successes and challenges. Encourage kids' curiosity about what people do for a living and how they ended up in the job they have. Talk about the educational or vocational training that was required.
- 5) Recognize and reward behaviors that will develop into strong, marketable skills such as honesty, accountability, accuracy, punctuality and teamwork. They not only develop a child's character, but also prepare them for becoming a respected employee or employer.
- 6) Engage kids in lively discussions about their futures; ask questions about what they like to do most at school, after school or with friends. Help them connect-the-dots between their interests and jobs that would incorporate those interests. Spend time together exploring options. Go on field trips, to the library, to neighborhood career fairs and corporate open houses. Visit college campuses and vocational training centers and ask questions about what people do for a living, what skills they needed to develop, who will hire them and what they will do on the job every day.
- 7) Add a new dimension to vacations and family outings by discussing the people behind the activities, events and exhibits you enjoy. Talk about who keeps our national parks safe and beautiful; who keeps the ocean and marine life healthy and vital; what professionals coordinate a museum or art exhibit. Delve into the backgrounds of the people who keep our world working smoothly and safely and who innovate new and better ideas that continually improve our standard of living.
- 8) Help your kids develop an appreciation and awareness of all the professionals who affect their lives on a daily basis, from the people who build our roads; to the waste management employees who



collect and recycle waste; to the farmer, food distributors and grocers who get food to the market shelves. Explore behind-the-scenes teamwork and all the jobs and talents involved.

- 9) Help your kids develop strong interpersonal communication skills. Don't let them focus only on computer, phone or text messaging skills. Help them learn how to verbalize their ideas and rationales concisely and to present them to others. The fear of speaking in public is one of the most common afflictions shared by adults. Help your child grow up at ease and confident in front of others. It will be a huge boost to their education, career and social success.
- 10) Help your kids develop a good work ethic by setting a good example. Do what you say you're going to do, live up to your responsibilities, be a team player and give 100% on the job — especially the job of preparing your kids for the future.

Centerforce Helps Strengthen Marriages

Centerforce is a non-profit organization based in the San Francisco Bay area that provides groundbreaking, evidence-based programs to improve the lives and strengthen the communities of incarcerated people and their loved ones. Centerforce programs serve a neglected community's broad set of needs, from health education and prevention services, to parenting and relationship classes, to relationship and communication skills-building workshops, to case-management for individuals and couples, and more.

One of Centerforce's noteworthy initiatives is the Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood project. The Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood project helps strengthen marriages and relationships of incarcerated men releasing from San Quentin State Prison. Centerforce targets fathers within three to 12 months of release and planning to return to the Bay Area.

The core element of the program includes a 12-week Back to Family class inside San Quentin State Prison that covers topics such as child development, parenting and co-parenting, stress and anger management, relationship building, and the impact of substance use, violence, and incarceration on children and families.

The program also provides Couples Enhancement Workshops for men prior to their release, bringing the men together with their partners inside the visiting area to participate in a day-long facilitated relationship and communication-building workshop. Couples Enhancement sessions provide partners the opportunity to deepen their communication skills and their commitment to their relationship in preparation for the man's release from prison.

The program also provides case management for men with their partners in preparation for and after reentry, to facilitate healthy reunification at reentry. The Family Reunification Case Management program reinforces progress made in the Back to Family classes and Couples Enhancement Workshops and provides general support for a broad spectrum of family needs during reentry.

Funding for this project was provided by a United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families grant.

For more information about the Healthy Marriage, Responsible Fatherhood and other Centerforce projects go to www.centerforce.org.

Tell Us about Your Program

One of the goals of the Parenting Special Interest Group is to provide a vehicle for communication among educators who are teaching or developing parenting programs in correctional facilities. You are invited to share information about your program by contributing an article for a future issue of this newsletter. Email your articles to barbara.rasmussen@wisconsin.gov or jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com.



Editor's Musings:

Summer is upon us—long, sometimes hot, hot, hot days (I apologize to all you summer lovers out there, but my favorite seasons are spring and fall). The summer brings thoughts of how the children are doing “out there” to the minds of the dads who are locked up here. And that is why we do what we do. We try to bring connections to the dads and moms who are not able to see their children on a daily, weekly, monthly, (or more) basis whether it be through parenting classes or book-sharing programs.

I am continually amazed at the discussions that evolve in a parenting class. It is a place for sharing information, but also a place to question whether previous actions were right, wrong, or indifferent. If nothing else, it can make someone discover a whole new concept, challenge previous notions, or just get a “hmmm” from someone who never went “hmmm” before. At any rate, it's always an adventure!

Enjoy the rest of your summer!

Barb Rasmussen, Editor

Check out the Parenting Special Interest Group Discussion Forum at www.ceanational.org

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