

# Parenting Connection

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## Wisconsin Book Sharing Projects Continue to Expand

Over the past 20+ years, the technology has changed, but the mission remains the same.

Begun in 1989 at the Wisconsin Resource Center with incarcerated parents reading children's books into cassette recorders and sending the books and tapes home to their children, parent-child book sharing projects have evolved to using videotapes, CDs, and DVDs. But the goals of the projects have remained constant: To strengthen the bond between incarcerated parents and their children and to promote literacy among both inmates and their children.

Over the years, the book sharing projects have expanded to 13 Wisconsin institutions and involve over 1000 inmates each year. Some institutions informally prep the parents before the recordings are made, while others require the parents to complete a structured class. Some institutions provide an added incentive of special visiting privileges for inmate participating in their book sharing project.

In March, another institution was added to the list of those hosting book sharing projects when Governor Scott Walker and 2012 Miss America Laura Kaeppeler joined DOC Secretary Gary Hamblin to announce the launch of a new inmate father-child reading program at Racine Youthful Offender Correctional Facility (RYOCF). RYOCF houses 450 offenders aged 15 through 24 who have been sentenced as adults. Over 200 or about half of the institution's population are fathers of more than 360 children. RYOCF's "Book Bridge" Program is part of his Governor's statewide Read to Lead initiative aimed at increasing reading proficiency in schools and improving literacy rates across Wisconsin.

Miss America said the Book Bridge Program will provide incarcerated parents with a vital link to their young children and help maintain relationships that are critical to the development and wellbeing of children. Kaeppeler, who is from Kenosha, spoke from personal experience as the child of a father who served time in federal prison.

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Miss America said she knows firsthand how essential it is for a child to stay connected with a parent who is incarcerated. "I personally know the challenges and struggles of growing up with a father who was incarcerated for a time," Ms. Kaeppler said. "This is an incredibly important program that will benefit children and families who are anxious to maintain and strengthen their connections with a parent who is currently serving a sentence in prison." She encourages fathers to take part in the Book Bridge Program as a way of maintaining a relationship with their children. And she said she is "truly honored" to be a part of it.

The five-week Book Bridge initiative is designed to simultaneously help both inmate fathers and their children improve their literacy skills. Offered ten times throughout the year to an average of 15 inmates per session, the program will accommodate inmates with multiple children and allow as many as 200 children to participate in the program. Designed to increase the literacy skills of both incarcerated fathers and their children, the program involves fathers recording themselves reading age-appropriate books to their children. Those recordings, along with copies of the books, will then be given to the children so they can follow along in the book while listening to their parent read.

The effects of the program will stretch beyond improved reading skills, Secretary Gary Hamblin explained. "No skill is more fundamental to their future success than reading," Hamblin said. "It is an important part of the bridge to success for both the parent and the child."

The program will be funded by the state with \$10,000. DOC Secretary Hamblin said the investment is money well spent. "The vast majority of our offenders will be released into the community one day and the inability to read at a proficient level restricts their chances for a successful reintegration into the community," said Secretary Hamblin. "This program also helps offenders improve their literacy skills so they can secure employment when they rejoin their families and lead law abiding and productive lives in the community." Secretary Hamblin said helping inmates maintain contact with their families while they are incarcerated also has an impact on recidivism and decreases their chances of re-incarceration.

Inmate father participants will track the number of books and the amount of time they spend reading to their children during face-to-face visits or during the audio/video recording of readings sent to their children. At the end of the five-week activity, the number of books read and the amount of time spent reading to their children will be tallied. The information and the results of an exit survey completed by each participant will be tracked by staff at the institution to make sure the program is meeting its intended goals.

## **Wisconsin Book Sharing Milestones:**

- December 1989 – Teacher Karen Brockhaus secures donations from Golden Books and UW-Oshkosh faculty organizations to begin Children's Book Project at Wisconsin Resource Center
- March 1992 – Teacher John Bollig coordinates Visitors' Book Project at Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution
- May 1996 – UW-Oshkosh instructor Dr. Margaret Gensio is awarded a Barbara Bush Foundation Grant to start Breaking Barriers with Books Program at Oshkosh Correctional Institution. Participants are allowed extra visiting time to read with their children.
- December 1997 – Mid-State Technical College teacher Marianna Ruprecht starts Holiday Book Project at Marathon County Jail
- April 2003 – Wisconsin Humanities volunteers begin Fatheread Program at Oakhill Correctional Institution. The program was picked up by Community Connections in 2004.
- March 2004 – Teacher Diane Birch establishes Fathers Sharing Books Project at Stanley Correctional Institution
- April 2004 – R. E. Ellsworth Correctional Center organizes Mothers Support group which hosts guest speakers on topics important to incarcerated mothers, including reading to your child.
- August 2004 – Cheri Wontor starts Fatheread at New Lisbon Correctional Institution



- November 2004 – Racine Correctional Institution teacher Barb Rasmussen and R. E. Ellsworth Correctional Center teacher DeNeal Ericksen attend MotheRead/FatheRead training and establish programs at their institutions. Participants are encouraged to create storybooks for their children.
- February 2005 – Cheri Wontor establishes FatheRead at Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility. Books for the program come from First Book who provides free books for low income families from publisher donations.
- July 2005 – The Parent Special Interest Group created in Wisconsin by Jerry Bednarowski, Diane Birch and Mary Dahl becomes a national Correctional Education Association Special Interest Group. One of its goals is to promote book sharing projects.
- July 2005 – Teachers Jane Boyle and Cheryl Edwards begin For Love of Reading Relationships program at Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution to educate fathers about children’s literature
- October 2005 - Chaplain Deborah Mejchar begins Read to Me Program at Fox Lake Correctional Institution and Fox Lake Minimum Correctional Institution.
- January 2007 – Chaplain Deborah Mejchar lobbies to have visiting policies changed at Fox Lake Correctional Institution to allow more father-child interaction, including additional time for reading in the visiting area.
- February 2007– Family Connection Network volunteers implement Reading Connections Program at Taycheedah Correctional Institution. Completion of the Active Parenting Program is linked to special visiting privileges. The Family Connection Network provides follow-up community support for many of the participants
- January 2008 – Teacher Randy Scott begins United through Reading Project at New Lisbon Correctional Institution. Participants create activity booklets for their children
- January 2008 – Chaplain Deborah Mejchar establishes Read to Me Project at Redgranite Correctional Institution
- May 2009 – Stanley Correctional Institution’s Fathers Sharing Books Program receives The First Lady Jessica Doyle Award for Family Literacy

## First Book: Books for Children in Poverty

It was several years ago that I started my master’s thesis in reading research when I came onto one of the most startling statistics in my teaching career: children in poverty have twenty-five books to be read to them by the time they reach kindergarten, while the affluent children have well over a thousand. I couldn’t help wanting to make a difference in my student’s children’s lives. It was a fact that spurred me to searching for books I could give freely to those in lower income households..

As a teacher in a prison, I began to realize how fortunate I was as youngster to have a mother go to the library every week and bring home a sack full of books to read to me during the week, – only to go back week after week and do the same thing. As I learned from my mother, I did the same thing for my three children because money back then wasn’t plentiful.

I wanted to do more so during my lunch hour I searched for free things for my students. I contacted several Reading Associations to which I belonged and found about First Book and their mission – to put as many books into the hands of low income children as possible. These books are donated from many companies and publishers.

This past year, I have had the privilege of securing over six hundred books from First Book for my students both on my Education Pod as well as for fathers during the holidays to give books to their children. It is our responsibility to help those in need and this is one way we can give back and help their children.

As I recently listened to the new Miss America, her passion and concern for children of prisoners – I, too, shared the same concerns. Please take time to make literacy and reading one of your priorities. We can all make a difference in our classroom, in our communities and in our nation. Contact First Book at [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org), to see how you can access free books for children in need.

by: Cheri Wontor  
Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility



# Handbooks Help Families Stay Connected

CEA-Wisconsin and the CEA Parenting Special Interest Group are pleased to announce the publishing and distribution of two handbooks for incarcerated parents and their families. To help incarcerated parents, the caregivers, and their children cope with incarceration, CEA-W has created *Reaching Out: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin* and its companion, *Reaching In: A Handbook for Families of Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin*.

These handbooks are designed to help strengthen the bonds between incarcerated parents and their children. By using the advice and information in these handbooks, incarcerated parents will find ways to “Reach Out” to their children; caregivers will find ways to help the children “Reach In” to their separated parent.

CEA-W wishes to thank these agencies and people for the inspiration to create these handbooks and permission to use their materials:

- The Council on Crime and Justice and the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Pamela G. Alexander, President, and Mark Haase, Vice President of Operations
- The Family and Corrections Network
- Jan Walker, author of *Parenting from a Distance: Your Rights and Responsibilities*

CEA-W also wishes to thank Community Circles of Support, a Program of Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin and Regional Leader Anne Strauch for generously funding the printing of 500 copies of each of the handbooks to be distributed to correctional institutions and community agencies.

CEA-W is partnering with the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, county jails, public libraries, and community organizations to make the handbooks available to parents and caregivers.

In the coming weeks, CEA-W will be distributing copies of the handbooks as widely as possible. This is our plan.

## **Copies of *Reaching Out: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin* will be distributed as follows:**

- Institutions with populations over 1000 (9 institutions)  
Library – 5, Parenting instructors – 5, Chaplain – 3
- Dodge Correctional Institution  
Library – 5, Chaplain – 3
- Institutions with populations 500-1000 (6 institutions)  
Library – 4, Parenting instructors – 4, Chaplain – 2
- Centers/Institutions with populations 200-500 (10 institutions)  
Library – 3, Parenting instructors – 3, Chaplain – 2
- Centers with populations under 200 (14 centers)  
Supervisor to distribute as appropriate – 3
- County Jails (70 jails)  
Teacher or Program Officer – 2
- Milwaukee House of Corrections  
Library – 4, Parenting instructors – 4, Chaplain – 2
- Dane County Jail  
Library – 2, Parenting instructors – 2



**Copies of *Reaching In: A Handbook for Families of Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin* will be distributed as follows:**

- Most copies will be distributed to community agencies including Circles of Support, Milwaukee Social Development Commission, Fatherhood Initiative, church groups, etc.
- Institutions with populations over 1000 (9 institutions)  
Library – 2, Parenting instructors –2, Chaplain – 1
- Dodge Correctional Institution  
Library – 2 Chaplain – 1
- Institutions with populations 500-1000 (6 institutions)  
Library – 2 Parenting instructors – 2 Chaplain – 1
- Centers/Institutions with populations 200-500 (10 institutions)  
Library – 1 Parenting instructors – 1 Chaplain – 1
- Centers with populations under 200 (14 centers)  
Supervisor to distribute as appropriate – 1
- County Jails (71 jails)  
Teacher or Program Officer – 1
- Milwaukee House of Corrections  
Library – 2 Parenting instructors – 2 Chaplain – 1
- Dane County Jail  
Library – 1, Parenting instructors – 1

**Electronic versions of both handbooks will be posted on the following websites:**

- CEA-Wisconsin
- National CEA
- Wisconsin DOC
- Circles of Support, a Program of Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin
- Fair Shake, Inc.

**Electronic versions of both handbooks will be sent to all Wisconsin Public Libraries**

If you have any questions about the handbooks or ideas for others who should receive copies, contact Jerry Bednarowski at [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com) .

## **Parenting Special Interest Group Workshop**

One of the ways the CEA's Parenting Special Interest Group (SIG) spreads the word about Parenting Programs in corrections is to present workshops at professional conferences. This workshop will be held at the **67th CEA Annual Conference & Training on July 29-August 1, 2012 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel – Riverfront, St. Paul, MN.** Conference information and registration forms for the 67<sup>th</sup> CEA Annual Conference & Training are on the national CEA website: [www.ceanational.org](http://www.ceanational.org).

### **Parenting Special Interest Group: A Resource for Parenting Instructors**

*Many correctional educators have developed classes, support groups, reading projects, and fairs for incarcerated parents. In most cases, their programs were developed independently and with little knowledge of each other. To address this problem CEA's Parenting Special Interest Group was formed. This workshop will describe the Parenting SIG's efforts to create a professional network, publish parenting newsletters and handbooks, present workshops and seminars, and serve as a resource for teachers. Presenters: Jerry Bednarowski, CEA-Wisconsin Board member & Chair of CEA's Parenting Special Interest Group and Margaret Done, CEA-Wisconsin President & teacher at R. E. Ellsworth Correctional Center*



# How to Talk about Jails and Prisons with Children

Mindy Clark, Director of National Outreach & Marketing for the Children's Justice Alliance, a program of Pathfinders of Oregon, has provided the following information on another valuable resource for talking to children about jails and prisons. The *How to Talk about Jails and Prisons with Children: A Caregiver's Guide* was written by Elizabeth Sazie and Diane Ponder in 2001 for the Oregon Department of Corrections and Children of Incarcerated Parents project. It was revised by the Children's Justice Alliance in 2010.

When parents are arrested or put in jail or prison, their children are often scared, confused and upset. This is not a rare event. According to US Department of Justice, in 2008, there were 1.5 million children under 18 years old with an incarcerated parent. Twenty-two percent of these children were under 5 years old. Often, people don't talk about having a family member in prison because it is very personal information. Children, though, may have a lot of questions.

## Who is the booklet for?

The booklet is for caregivers, for family members of the child, and for youth who are seeking their own information. It is designed to help moms, dads and caregivers answer children's questions about jail and prison. When children and families receive accurate information, they can understand and cope with some of the stress they may experience when a relative goes to jail or prison.

Most children are curious about jails and prisons, and many adults don't know what these institutions are really like. The Oregon Department of Corrections has put together some questions and answers to provide factual information. The booklet is written to provide accurate information and is intended to promote open and honest communication between children and adults. Ideally, even children old enough to read it on their own will read it with their caregiver. Children too young to comprehend it on their own can also benefit if an adult talks with them about the topics in the booklet. Children and youth benefit if guided by adults through the experience of talking in an emotionally safe, comforting, and nurturing way.

## Feelings and Emotions

When family members, such as Mom or Dad, go to jail or prison, it may be very difficult for everyone involved. For some children, the experience can be emotionally devastating, while for others it is less serious. Sometimes it is a relief.

The child's age, understanding of the situation, and the reactions of others, particularly of family members, all play a part in the overall impact the experience will have on the child. Children may have different feelings, and sometimes even several feelings at once, or one right after the other. Some children might feel sadness, fear, guilt, disbelief, anxiety, anger, and/or powerlessness. Caregivers may use pictures in the booklet to help children identify their feelings:

Children may experience many mixed emotions from the time of the parent's arrest to well after his or her release. While these feelings may be expressed at any time, they are more likely to come to a head at certain stages: arrest, trial, sentencing, incarceration (often most strongly during/ following visiting), and release. Often, the most stressful time is in the weeks and months following release. It can be difficult for an absent parent to reconnect with a child who has grown accustomed to living without him or her.

## Common Questions

To help children work through their feelings, including curiosity, the booklet lists some common questions families ask and offer suggestions for helping caregivers to respond.



## Obtaining Booklets

To download the *How to Talk about Jails and Prisons with Children: A Caregiver's Guide*, go to <http://www.childrensjusticealliance.org>.

The Children's Justice Alliance is willing to share their files with other states who want to put their own contact information in the booklet and then they take on responsibility for doing the printing. As long as Oregon DOC and Children's Justice Alliance receive acknowledgement for the original work, they are happy to make the booklet text available to others.

# Community Solutions Improves the Quality of Life for the Prison Family

Shamed and embarrassed, typically families of prisoners, having done no wrong themselves withdraw and isolate from the mainstream community believing they are powerless to improve their dire circumstances. Founder and Executive Director of Community Solutions Carolyn Esparza observed that as a result the prisoner's family has no voice to express their pain, let alone to advocate on behalf of themselves, their children or their incarcerated loved ones.

When the opportunity arose to begin a specialized program that would give the prison family a voice and improve the quality of life for them and their children, and thereby improve the quality of life for our community, Carolyn eagerly accepted the challenge. Thus, Community Solutions was formed in 2003 in El Paso, Texas with the mission to strengthen community by strengthening the most disenfranchised and underserved children, youth and families and to help them achieve their highest potential to become valuable and valued members of the mainstream community.

The incarceration of a loved one profoundly traumatizes the entire prison family.

Tragically this fact all too often leads many prison family members down unproductive and even risky paths that ultimately destroy families and diminish the quality of life. Typically the community responds with indifference. Believing justice has been served and the matter is resolved when the perpetrator of a crime receives a prison sentence, the community largely ignores and even shuns the prisoner's families.

Unfortunately, looking the other way rarely resolves any problem; and in this case stigmatizing the prison family only forces them into an isolation that worsens the problem. As a result, as many as 70% of children of prisoners become prisoners themselves and as many as 85% of returning prisoners, sorely unprepared for community and family life, with families sorely unprepared to receive them, recidivate within three years of their release from prison. This indifference and even disdain actually imperils the safety and quality of life in the community.

Community Solutions believes that to improve these tragic circumstances the community must rise up to embrace the prison family. They are not simply families of prisoners, they are **FAMILIES OF PROMISE!**

To reduce the risk factors associated with families of prisoners, Community Solutions has established the Connections Program which provides specialized services for children of prisoners, with outreach to their caregivers and other family members.

## Services

- **One-to-One Mentoring** - Children of prisoners ages four through high school are matched with caring volunteers who become special friends to the child and their caretaker during a very difficult

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time. Mentors are provided comprehensive preparatory and on-going training; undergo background and drug screens and receive a home visit from a caseworker before being matched with a "Connections KID." Ongoing match support and supervision is provided by program caseworkers.

- **Group & Team Mentoring Activities** - Participating children are engaged in a broad range of social, cultural, educational and recreational activities. These activities initially help the child and their caretaker build trust with the Connections Program staff and mentors, and offer opportunities for interaction with a variety of mainstream community members. Frequently community organizations sponsor these events.
- **Academic Mentoring** - Mentors provide after school homework assistance and tutoring in basic academic subjects for participating "Connections" KIDS.
- **Re-entry Life Coaching** - On a limited basis, Community Solutions has begun specialized services for returning citizens. It is hoped that with sufficient funding and volunteer support this critical program component will rapidly grow.
- **Connections KIDS Care Project** - Youth, assisted by mentors, volunteers and staff are responsible for selecting, developing and implementing service-learning projects for others in need throughout the community. "Connections KIDS" and their mentors also actively participate in projects supporting the work of Community Solutions.
- **Connections KASA** - KASA is specialized services for children having parents in prison as a result of an addiction to chemical substances. Services include individual, group and family counseling as well as prevention awareness group sessions.
- **Connections LOVE** - LOVE provides support for caregivers and other family members. Regularly scheduled support groups and life enrichment activities provide opportunities for listening, observing, validating and encouraging one another during a most challenging and often painful life experience. Families are provided reintegration preparation for the return of their loved one from prison, as well as follow up support upon their loved one's return.

As a pioneer in serving the prison family, Community Solutions hosted the first-ever National Prisoner's Family Conference in 2009. Now held annually, the conference draws participants from across the country.

For more information, visit the Community Solutions of El Paso's website: [www.solutionsforel Paso.org](http://www.solutionsforel Paso.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 your ideas by contributing an article for a future issue of this newsletter. Email your articles to [Barbara.Rasmussen@Wisconsin.gov](mailto:Barbara.Rasmussen@Wisconsin.gov) or [JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com).

Here are some suggestions for articles:

- Share a creative lesson plan that you use in your Parenting Class
- Compile a list of books and videos you use in your Parenting Class
- Describe how your parent/child book project works
- Share advice on establishing a Fathers or Mothers Fair
- Describe a training workshop that you found useful
- Describe how you involve community organizations in your program
- Describe how you have made your institution more family-friendly

To join CEA go to: [www.ceanational.org](http://www.ceanational.org)



# Brain Blog: Naptime Is Great !

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 Blogs 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](http://www.braininsightsonline.com).

## This issue's Brain Blog:



Naptime is much more than providing rest for a child . . . and a break for parents! Children's developing brains need adequate amounts of sleep for healthy brain development.

We all know what it is like to deal with an over tired child. The reason for the behaviors we experience is due to a child not being able to handle the results of inadequate amounts of sleep. First of all the child still has an immature brain. It hasn't developed enough to provide the ability to deal with feelings of brain systems being out of balance. This is even difficult for adults. Getting enough sleep helps keep brain systems in balance. When children have had enough sleep it enhances cognitive functioning and moods.

New research lead by the University of Colorado-Boulder reveals that, "toddlers between 2 1/2 and 3 years old who miss only a single daily nap show more anxiety, less joy and interest and a poorer understanding of how to solve problems."

Assistant Professor Monique LeBourgeois of UC-Boulder led the study. She states, "This study shows insufficient sleep in the form of missing a nap taxes the way toddlers express different feelings, and, over time, may shape their developing emotional brains and put them at risk for lifelong, mood-related problems." Additionally LeBourgeois shares, "Just like good nutrition, adequate sleep is a basic need that gives children the best chance of getting what is most important from the people and things they experience each day."

Sleep well!

## Need Help?

Do you have any questions or need some advice on starting or improving your parenting classes, parent/child literacy program, or parent support group for offenders?

We have an email list of almost 200 parenting educators from 29 states who are eager to help. Just send an email to [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com) with your question or request and I will forward it to our email list. Then wait a few days and the helping responses will be sent to you.



## Editor's Musings:

*When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.*

~ Mark Twain

I know that my parents got “smarter” as I aged, and I delighted in hearing my daughter say words that came as blasts from mother-daughter past exchanges when she was dealing with a messy roommate. But when you are in the midst of the so-called “stupid” years as a parent, it is not so easy to shake off the eye-rolling, criticism, and exasperated sighs that your child gives you even if you have a sense of humor. And if you are old-school – spare the rod and spoil the child – frustrated with life in general, or experience a sense of powerlessness, these years will be more challenging. Discipline techniques need to be taught as I have found that many of our students really hang on to the “spare the rod” techniques. This is a challenge that we face as teachers, but it can be rewarding when a student comes back after trying some of the different approaches, even if it is only in the visiting room, and tells you, “Hey, that #!@\* really works!”

Enjoy your spring, and enjoy the growth that your students may experience!

**Barb Rasmussen**

**For past issues of the Parenting Connection newsletter, go to [www.ceawisconsin.org](http://www.ceawisconsin.org)**

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