

# Parenting Connection

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## Study Examines Mentoring Programs for Children with Incarcerated Parents

With more than 1.7 million children having a parent who is incarcerated in a state or federal prison and evidence that they are at risk for developing behavior and school problems, attention has been turned to formalized mentoring programs that match at-risk youth with adult volunteers as an intervention effort to address some of the needs of this population. Despite their popularity, such mentoring programs have not been explored in the empirical literature.

In a recent research paper, *Mentoring Children With Incarcerated Parents: Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy*, Rebecca J. Schlafer, Julie Poehlmann, Brianna Coffino, and Ashley Hanneman investigated children and families who were participating in a mentoring program targeting children with incarcerated parents. The purpose of the study was to examine the development of mentoring relationships and children's behavioral outcomes in the context of participating in a mentoring program.

The study examined 57 mentor-child dyads who participated in Mentoring Connections, a Department of Health and Human Services funded program administered through Big Brothers/Big Sisters, designed to serve children (4-16) with an incarcerated parent. The study examined the following research questions:

1. What is the rate and context of match termination among children of incarcerated parents participating in a mentoring program? Is termination related to children's relationships with their current caregivers and incarcerated parents or their behavior problems?
2. During the first 6 months of participation in a mentoring program, what activities do matches engage in, how frequent is their contact, and what do participants report about the strengths and challenges of the mentoring relationship?
3. Is the frequency or length of contact between mentors and children related to children's behavior problems during the first six months of program participation? Is program participation related to changes in children's behavior during this time?

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In this study, focused on children of incarcerated parents in the context of participating in a mentoring program, three main findings emerged:

1. Nearly one-third of the matches terminated within the first 6 months of participation in the program. Several common reasons for match termination emerged including scheduling conflicts, family issues, residential mobility, mentors' underestimation of the commitment required, and match incompatibility.
2. Children experienced a number of sociodemographic risks and family transitions that created challenges for mentors.
3. Many children developed feelings of trust and closeness toward their mentors after continued participation in the program. Children who continued to participate in the program for 6 months and who met with their mentors more frequently exhibited fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

This study is one of the first to explore mentoring children with incarcerated parents. The researchers conclude, "Federal initiatives to extend mentoring to high-risk children are a first step, but programs must do more to understand and address these children's specific needs. Our conclusions echo those of other researchers who have cautioned against the unfettered expansion of mentoring programs. To ensure that mentoring programs are most effective, they should be theoretically grounded, rigorously evaluated using randomized controlled designs, and assess children's relationships with mentors and family members. Although many policymakers have embraced mentoring, scholarly work has not been commensurate with this enthusiasm. We are hopeful that this study can provide some initial insights for researchers and practitioners."

The entire *Children with Incarcerated Parents: Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy* study may be found at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Questions may be addressed to Rebecca Shlafer at [shlaf002@umn.edu](mailto:shlaf002@umn.edu) or Julie Poehlmann at [poehlmann@waisman.wisc.edu](mailto:poehlmann@waisman.wisc.edu).

## **Motherhead/Fatheread Helps Incarcerated Parents Connect with their Children**

Motherhead, Inc. is a nationally acclaimed, private, nonprofit organization that combines the teaching of literacy skills with child development, adult empowerment and professional skill development. Adults and children learn to use the power of language to discover more about themselves, their families, and their communities.

Motherhead offers a variety of curriculum-based trainings for developing literacy skills with different populations. Trainings can be customized for specific groups in your state or community. Motherhead has been doing correctional work since 1987.

Since its inception, Motherhead has helped incarcerated mothers improve their literacy skills and use books to connect with their children. Motherhead programming reaches mothers, grandmothers, aunts, expectant and first-time mothers, and mothers recovering from drug and/or alcohol addiction. They currently teach classes using the Motherhead/Fatheread curriculum in four North Carolina correctional facilities.

Some correctional educators in other states have received Motherhead/Fatheread training and adapted the curriculum for use in their facilities with both males and females. The 20-hour interactive Motherhead/Fatheread curriculum uses adult narratives and children's literature to teach essential literacy skills employing real-life family contexts and adult roles.



Training topics include:

- Teaching approaches and learning styles: individual assignments, small group work, lecture, and discussion
- Use of story: thematic analysis
- Adult classes: use of parent education and literacy development curriculum, instructional techniques, lesson planning, preparation, and presentations
- Evaluation: authentic assessment, student goals, measuring student outcomes, using standardized measures
- Program implementation: start-up, recruitment and retention, program development, and integration of curriculum into existing program structures and requirements

The training fee is \$675 per person, but some of the cost may be offset by state or local sponsoring agencies.

Motheread/Fatheread has designed a curriculum specifically for use with incarcerated men. *Fathers Acting to Heal, Educate, and Reconnect (F.a.t.h.e.r.)* uses the power of books and story to help fathers in prison connect with their children, communicate from a distance, understand children's reactions to incarceration, and learn about parent and child development.

This curriculum was created with extensive input from groups of inmate fathers, North Carolina Department of Correction staff, and an experienced professional advisory committee. The 10-lesson curriculum is designed to be used by a highly diverse group of students – from young fathers to older fathers, expectant fathers to those who have grown children, those going home soon to those incarcerated for years, those with frequent contact with their children to those who rarely see their children. Given this diversity, the lessons are guided by universal themes and by activities that encourage and enable fathers to reconnect with their children. Topics include: Understanding Children's Reactions to Incarceration, Communicating from a Distance, Understanding Parent and Child Development, and Building Self-Esteem. This curriculum is available only as part of the F.a.t.h.e.r. training.

For information about the Motheread/Fatheread training or sponsoring agencies in your area, contact Ev Machtinger, National Training Coordinator at [emmothered@bellsouth.net](mailto:emmothered@bellsouth.net).

## 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.

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

Email your articles to [Barbara.Rasmussen@Wisconsin.gov](mailto:Barbara.Rasmussen@Wisconsin.gov) or [JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com)



# Preparation Is Key to Read-to-Me Program

The Read-to-Me program at Fox Lake Correctional Institution (Wisconsin) invites men to: "Develop and maintain important emotional connections with their children and family during incarceration."

Chaplain Deborah Mejchar claims the Read-to-Me program also helps offenders to:

- Assume an aspect of the parenting role while incarcerated by reading to his children and encouraging reading as one of their activities
- Prepare 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

Any man can read to an important child in his life: child, grandchild, niece, nephew, younger sibling, etc. The children need to be on the inmates approved visiting list.

A key to making the program run smoothly is inmate preparation. Prior to the videotaping session, the offender is given the preparation videotaping hand-out (below). If an offender needs help in selecting a book, the Chaplain is available. The offender is encouraged to practice reading the book prior to the videotaping session.

If you have a Parent/Child Book Reading Project at your facility, Deborah urges you to provide the participants with a handout similar to the one below. If you have any questions, you may contact Deborah at [deborah.mejchar@wisconsin.gov](mailto:deborah.mejchar@wisconsin.gov).

## Preparation for Videotaping

### 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.
- 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.
- Share your feelings. "Daddy Loves You!" "Dad Misses You".
- Please make no promises to your child.
- 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 and why you like it.
- 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 or your 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 and 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.
- 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.
- 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. What are they doing? Can you spot the dog? He's hiding.
- 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.

# ***Reaching Out and Reaching In Handbooks***

In May, CEA-Wisconsin and the CEA Parenting Special Interest Group published two handbooks for incarcerated parents and their families. The *Reaching Out: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin* and its companion, *Reaching In: A Handbook for Families of Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin* 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 parents.

Copies of both handbooks were sent to librarians, parenting instructors, and chaplains in each major Wisconsin state institution and supervisors in each Wisconsin correctional center. Copies were also sent to Wisconsin Technical College System instructors and supervisors of programming in most Wisconsin county jails. Copies of the *Reaching In* handbook were distributed to many community organizations that work with the families of incarcerated parents.

If you did not receive a copy of either the *Reaching Out* or *Reaching In* handbook and would like one, contact [jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com](mailto:jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com) and you will be sent a copy. People outside the state of Wisconsin may print a copy of both handbooks from the [www.ceawisconsin.org](http://www.ceawisconsin.org) website.



# Isis Rising Doulas Support Imprisoned Moms

Isis Rising is a pregnancy and parenting program for mothers incarcerated at the Shakopee Women's Prison in Shakopee, Minnesota.

## Who can participate?

Women can participate in Isis Rising if they are:

- currently pregnant
- have given birth within the last year
- parenting a child under 5 years old

## What does participation involve?

The Isis Rising group meets for two hours every week, for 12 weeks. Each week they discuss different topics related to pregnancy and parenting. Moms in the Isis Rising group learn about:

- prenatal development
- the birth process
- self-care
- stress management
- child development
- maintaining relationships during incarceration

## Who leads the groups?

Each weekly session is led by two doulas. A doula (pronounced "doó la") is a person who is trained to assist women before, during, or after childbirth. Isis Rising doulas help educate and support moms during their time at Shakopee.

If a woman is pregnant, she can also be matched with a doula. A doula will meet with the woman one-on-one to help her prepare for her labor and delivery. When she goes into labor, the doula will meet her at the local hospital and provide her with support. After the mother returns to the prison, the doula will meet with her again to discuss any post-partum concerns she may be having.

## Program Outcomes

Since Isis Rising was started in 2009, over 150 mothers have participated they've helped deliver 24 babies. Last year, Isis Rising partnered with researchers at the University of Minnesota to evaluate the needs of women participating in Isis Rising. Results from this program evaluation are forthcoming.

Additional information about Isis Rising can be found at <http://prisondoulas.blogspot.com/>. For questions about the program or the research and evaluation contact Rebecca Shlafer ([shlaf002@umn.edu](mailto:shlaf002@umn.edu)) or Erica Gerrity ([egerrity@gmail.com](mailto:egerrity@gmail.com)).

by: Erica Gerrity, Minnesota Correctional Facility- Shakopee

## 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 helpful responses will be sent to you.



# Brain Blog: You Are Making an Impact on Young Developing Brains!

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 your students can do with their children to promote brain development visit [www.braininsightsonline.com](http://www.braininsightsonline.com).

## **This issue's Brain Blog is:**

Do you realize ALL that you are doing and can do to make a REAL difference for children? You are critically important!

As I often say to audiences at the beginning of brain presentations, "I am thrilled that technology allows the study of the brain, like we've never seen before." When scientific research began demonstrating that a child's early development is largely determined by the daily environment and experiences, rather than genetics alone, I became extremely excited. I was an early childhood educator at that time and knew the impact of the early years, but having scientific evidence to support the dramatic difference parents, quality early childhood educators and care providers make was very reinforcing.

The good news is that advances in brain research have demonstrated the enormous importance of the early years in determining a person's future success in learning and in life. It is now known that a child's brain continues to develop long after birth. The term "brain development" means more than just intelligence building. It means the actual structural changes that take place in the brain. The experiences a child has in the early years activate the actual physical connections between brain cells that make the brain grow — in other words, the brain's "wiring." We now understand that overall development is based on this brain wiring, most of which takes place before age 5. This wiring develops best when a child:

- receives good daily nutrition
- enjoys a variety of positive experiences
- hears rich language
- is provided with adequate amounts of sleep
- lives with routines and predictability
- has opportunities to develop relationships with nurturing caring adults and other children
- learns through lots of time to play and explore

Conversely, constant exposure to stress, limited stimulation, poor nutrition and lack of nurturing relationships all lead to types of brain wiring that can contribute to emotional and learning problems. Brains learn early how to cope with the environment to which we are exposed, sometimes with harmful results.

This information is critical because of the large numbers of children that are in out of home care and education programs for much of their day. Early childhood professionals who are knowledgeable about early brain development have a dramatic and VERY positive influence. Dedicated and caring parents and professionals create healthy learning environments and the loving interactions growing minds need.

The sad thing is most people do not yet know the significance of the early years. People caring for and educating children can make significant difference in two ways.

1. Providing healthy, safe, nurturing and fun environments for children every day
2. Creating awareness and understanding of the critical impact of the early years



## Editor's Musings:

It's fall! Finally the hot summer is over, the leaves have fallen, and soon, the four-letter word beginning with S may fall. And another session of our book-sharing program has ended as well.

This particular class started out with a group of men who wanted to know why they had to do any class work. Couldn't they just record a book and be done with it? Moans. Groans. Sighs. I suggested that they just go with the flow. It's your price of admission. Then we started reading books — a book about a monster; a book about a grandfather who was an immigrant, but still loved his home country; a book about chickens who valued reading; and a couple of classics, some with a twist. Laughter, acting, falsetto voices — huh, this was fun!

Then came the "arts and crafts" section. Some men stated that they couldn't do art, they didn't draw, and they couldn't write. Within a day, the whole group sat together, talking quietly while drawing, cutting, coloring, and making their written work worthy to send to their kids. I heard, "Can we stay longer? Do you have any more pink paper, 'cause she likes princesses? What color is Tweety's beak?" You know — the serious kinds of questions you'd expect to hear in prison.

So I guess the moral of the story is that the book-sharing experience teaches the dads just as much as the kids. Have fun passing it on!

**Barb Rasmussen**

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

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