

Parenting Connection

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Storybook Project Connects Thousands

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois' (LSSI) Prisoner & Family Ministry Storybook Project began in 1997 with the men and women who were then incarcerated at Logan Correctional Center. The Storybook Project helps keep incarcerated parents and their children connected. With the help of volunteers, an incarcerated parent selects a book and makes a recording of him- or herself reading that book. Parents may also record a brief, personal message, a song, or a Bible verse for their child. The recording and book are then sent to the child. Annually, more than 16 federal, state and county correctional facilities in Illinois host Storybook Project events quarterly, eight times a year, or monthly.

Storybook provides an oral connection between an incarcerated mom or an incarcerated dad and their children. Storybook is a positive, non-threatening way for volunteers to relate to inmates as parents, to encourage an interest in literacy in the parent and the child, and to support the relationship between parent and child. Storybook events connect these parents with their children across the state from Dixon to Metropolis — a geographic spread of over 350 miles.

Fast Facts about Storybook

- In 2012, Storybook celebrated 15 years of service to the incarcerated moms and dads in Illinois!
- Since 1997, 50,000+ children have received books and recordings from their incarcerated parent.
- Currently more than 5,000 children each year benefit from their mother's or father's involvement in Storybook Project.
- More than 150 volunteers from 40+ churches statewide assist in the recording of the books.
- Storybook Project depends on 100 churches, community groups and individuals for donations of books, supplies and money to pay the postage.
- Storybook has received numerous "Volunteer Program" and "Most Versatile Program" awards at state and federal facilities.

Learn more about the Storybook Project at www.lssi.org or e-mail: Gail.Bead@LSSI.org.

In This Issue

- 1 Storybook Project Connects Thousands
- 2 Echoes of Incarceration Project Gives Teens a Voice
- 3 Film Explores Role of Mothers in Prison
- 4 Survey Sheds Light on Critical Issues
- 6 Tell Us About Your Program
- 7 Barbara Bush Foundation Announces "Devoted Dad" Letter Writing Contest
- 7 Need Help?
- 8 Editor's Musings

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Echoes of Incarceration Project Gives Teens a Voice

Echoes of Incarceration is an award-winning documentary initiative produced by teens with incarcerated parents. The 10 minute DVD intercuts the stories of four young people with the voices of experts and advocates in the field, and creates an emotional, compelling case for the importance of ongoing parental contact. The project explores the issue of mass incarceration and its effects on families as told through the life experiences of the filmmakers themselves.

The DVD has been shown in prisons, universities, and trainings around the country with highly enthusiastic feedback wherever it has been shown.



The *Echoes of Incarceration* DVD is part of a project that is a collaboration between filmmaker Jeremy Robins and a group of non-profit organizations and advocates around the country. The project started with intensive filmmaking and advocacy training for youth age 16-22. The crew then launched into production of documentary films under the guidance of a team of professional filmmakers and experts in the field of criminal justice. The ultimate goal is to give voice to one of the largest and most invisible social issues of our times, and to harness the intelligence, energy, and creativity of young people to rethink our understandings of crime and punishment.

Phase 1:

The first “Echoes” film was created in collaboration with the CUNY Graduate Center in a Ford Foundation-funded project in 2009. The film has been used by advocates and educators around the country, and currently is traveling around the world as a part of the Media that Matters Film Festival.

Phase 2:

In 2013 the project will create a series of short films that loosely correspond to the Bill of Rights for Children with Incarcerated Parents created by the San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership.

Phase 3:

Eventually the project seeks to nurture a crew of highly-trained young filmmakers and embark on a large scale documentary on the issues of justice, prison reform, and families of the incarcerated around the country.

Free *Echoes of Incarceration* DVD's are available for educators and advocates. To request a DVD, email Jeremy@ibisdocs.com. For more information about the project, go to www.echoesofincarceration.org.

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



Film Explores Role of Mothers in Prison

Is it possible to become a better mother while serving time in a maximum security prison? *Mothers of Bedford*, a feature-length documentary follows five women incarcerated in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York and looks at their lives through the lens of motherhood.

Mothers of Bedford provides audiences with unprecedented access to this community of women and seeks to move our national conversation about incarceration to a new level. It explores the effects of a long-term prison sentence on the mother-child relationship. The film examines the struggles and joys these five women face as prisoners and mothers. It shows the normal frustrations of parenting as well as the surreal experiences of a child's first birthday party inside prison, the cell that child lives in with her mother, and the biggest celebration of the year – Mother's Day in prison!

Eighty percent of women in US prisons today are mothers of school-age children. Filmmaker Jenifer McShane spent four years visiting Bedford Hills and following the women and their families. A mother herself, Jenifer was drawn to the universal themes of motherhood and the staggering power of the mother-child relationship. In all walks of life, mother and child care for each other. As we watch the mothers inside Bedford trying to better themselves, we see parts of our own selves – and that gives us all hope.

According to McShane, the five women each have children who participate in a program at the Children's Center of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility which helps the incarcerated mothers maintain and improve their relationship with their children. The program was founded by Sister Elaine Roulet over 30 years ago after she realized that many children, whose mothers go to prison, often lose contact with their mothers. This can cause untold damage to a mother-child relationship, no matter how strong the positive effect of the rehabilitation program is for the incarcerated woman.

"I was really surprised that, as a mother myself, I didn't really know that much about what was happening in prison in terms of parenting," McShane says. "Research has found that with the right supportive services, both parent and child can develop in prison. Mothers also tend to have lower rates of recidivism after being released."

"Look at these women, whatever their stories are, they love their children. I wanted the audience to understand how they got themselves into this situation and continue to love their child and more importantly, let their child know they are loved," she says. "Ideally, when they are released you want them to have a healthy communicative relationship with their child and loved ones and obviously it's better to be integrated into society if they have that support."

Connecting with the women was something McShane was worried about, but she found everyone open and willing to tell their stories. "I thought I would have a harder time with that but when they allowed me to go in, I met about 14 women and they were all participating in a summer program where they have kids come up and visit their mothers for a week and have host families in the community," she says. "During the day they would go into the prison and it was like a camp. I really wanted to capture that and all the women came out of that group. I was very blessed to get articulate women who were willing to share."

This film project has non-profit status through The Center of Independent Documentary (CID). You may make a donation to help this meaningful film find a wide audience by contacting CID's Susi Walsh at Susi@documentaries.org or mail a donation to CID at 680 South Main Street, Sharon, MA 02067.

You may contact the filmmaker Jenifer McShane at mothersofbedfordoutreach@gmail.com.



Survey Sheds Light on Critical Issues

The New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents was launched by the Osborne Association in 2006. The New York Initiative works in partnership with government agencies and community and faith-based organizations to advocate for and support policies and practices that meet the needs and respect the rights of children and youth whose parents are involved in the criminal justice system.

In May 2011, the New York Initiative issued a statewide report entitled, *A Call to Action: Safeguarding New York's Children of Incarcerated Parents*. The report made 87 recommendations in the areas of arrest, sentencing, incarceration, reentry, education, child welfare, caregiver support, and children's health and mental health. These recommendations have led to significant efforts including pending legislation and interagency work currently underway.

In conjunction with the New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents, the Division of Criminal Justice Services has just released a 16-page report that provides previously unavailable information about New York State's children with parents in prison. The report, *Children of Incarcerated Parents In New York State - A Data Analysis (2013)*, is based on nearly 900 surveys with incarcerated mothers and fathers in seven different state prisons. It sheds light on critically important but often invisible issues, including children being present at their parent's arrest, barriers to visiting and phone contact, greater instability faced by children with incarcerated mothers, termination of parental rights, and more.

The survey was structured to gather information to inform policy discussion related to the following:

- How many incarcerated individuals have minor children?
- What type and amount of contact do incarcerated parents have with their children prior to and during their incarceration?
- What factors influence parents' ability to maintain contact with children?
- What are the living arrangements of children prior to and following parents' incarceration?
- What type of activities do incarcerated parents use to maintain a role in the care and planning for their children in foster care?
- To what extent have children with incarcerated parents witnessed the arrest of their parent?
- What percent of incarcerated parents plan to reunify with their children?
- What factors do incarcerated parents identify as barriers to their reunification with their children?

Survey findings include:

Prevalence of Minor Children Among Respondents — While parent participants reported having between one and nine children, families tended to be small and the children tended to be young. Parent participants averaged 2.0 minor children with 73% having only one or two children, 54% having at least one child under the age of 21 and 70% of the children falling between the ages of one and 13.

Contact Between Children and Incarcerated Parents — Responses to the survey showed significant connections between parent participants and their children prior to incarceration. Almost 85% of parents reported contact with their child prior to incarceration, 81% reported physically caring for their children, 80% noted financial support for their children, 74% reported making decisions about their children's daily activities, and 56% of the children reported in the survey were living with the parent participant prior to the parent's incarceration.

A major goal of the survey was to understand the frequency and type of contact between children and their incarcerated parents as well as the barriers to contact. Some sort of contact between children and their incarcerated parent was reported for 78% of the children in the survey. Letter writing and phone conversations were the most frequently reported methods of contact, but only 42% had experienced a face



to face visit with their incarcerated parent. No contact at all between the parent and the child was reported for 17% of the children.

Parent participants identified distance from children as the top barrier to face to face visits. A lack of transportation and cost followed as the most frequently identified barriers to visitation. Family barriers to visitation were also substantial, as 46% of the parent participants reported that either the stress of visitation on the family, caregiver refusal to bring the child or a lack of an available adult to bring the child were barriers to visitation for them. At the same time, institutional barriers such as inadequate visiting space for children and a lack of clarity about the visiting schedule were reported by only a small minority of parents. Finally, only three percent of parents reported that their children do not want to visit them in prison.

Survey respondents reported that 55% of their children had experienced telephone communication with their incarcerated parent; but 44% indicated that their children did not have the phone capacity to accept collect calls, 31% of respondents indicated that the cost of collect calls presented a barrier to phone communication with their children, and 17% indicated that their children did not have access to a phone at all. Over one third of parents reported that phone communication worked well for them, as they did not identify any barriers to phone communication with their children.

Children's Living Arrangements — The survey asked a series of threshold questions designed to assess the impact the parent's incarceration had on the children's living arrangements. Responses showed that almost half of the children lived with the incarcerated parent or lived in some combination that included the incarcerated parent prior to that parent's incarceration. Slightly over half of the children living with the incarcerated parent prior to incarceration ended up living with the other parent at the time the incarcerated parents completed the survey, 15% were living with grandparents, 10% were living with other relatives, 10% were living with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 8% were reported as being in foster care.

Maintaining a Parental Role for Children in Foster Care — The link between a parent's capacity to plan and care for their child and their ability to maintain parental rights while incarcerated is strong. While the ultimate sample of children in foster care was relatively small, the results show that maintaining any kind of a role is incredibly difficult. About 80% of the youth reported to be in foster care had a parent whose parental rights had either already been terminated or were in the process of termination.

Of the survey respondents with children in foster care who had not lost their parental rights, a significant number of incarcerated parents with children in foster care may not have ongoing communication with their children's foster care caseworkers and contact with the schools that their children were attending was virtually nonexistent.

Children as Witnesses to Parents' Arrests — Researchers have documented that children can experience significant trauma when witnessing the arrest of a parent. The survey included questions to assess the child's involvement in the parent's arrest in order to assess the extent to which the children reported in the study were present at the time of their parent's arrest.

One third of the incarcerated parents reported that at least one of their children had been involved in their arrest in some way, 18% reported that their child had witnessed their arrest, 10% had been handcuffed in front of their child, and 9% reported that law enforcement drew a weapon in front of their children. Only 15% reported that the arresting officers had inquired whether the parent was responsible for the care of the children at the time of arrest. Only 11% reported that the arresting officers allowed them to make arrangements for the care of their child at the time of arrest.

Reunification Plans and Barriers — The survey was constructed to assess the incarcerated parents' plans to reunite with their children. Of the respondents who had at least one child under the age of 21, 57%



reported plans to live with at least one of their children post-release. However, the incarcerated parents identified a number of significant barriers to these plans.

The most widely reported anticipated barrier to reunification was the need to rebuild the relationship with the child. Over 44% of the incarcerated parents reported that their relationships with their children needed rebuilding, 17% reported lack of housing as a problem, 15% reported lack of employment as a problem, and 14% reported the child's whereabouts are unknown.

Less than half of the children had experienced face-to-face contact with their incarcerated parent during the period of incarceration, and less than one quarter had no contact with their incarcerated parent at all. This lack of connectivity between the child and the incarcerated parent, evidenced by the large number of parents who did not know where their children were residing and the significant number of parents who reported a need to rebuild relationships with their children, illustrates the major challenge that many incarcerated parents and their children face in reunifying as a family following a period of incarceration.

Conclusion — This survey was a first step to develop comprehensive data regarding the impact of parental incarceration on children in New York State. It identified these areas for further analysis and policy reform:

- Strategies to increase face to face visiting between children and their incarcerated parents should be explored, especially in medium security prisons.
- Strategies to overcome the financial barriers to phone call contact between incarcerated parents and their children should be developed.
- The differential impact that children with incarcerated mothers experience should be a point of focus, with special emphasis on placing single parent heads of households whose children are in foster care as close to their children as possible.
- Programs and services for grandparent and other non-parent caretakers could be targeted to serving women's prisons.
- Child sensitive police arrest protocols should be developed and trained to reduce the traumatic impact experienced by children who witness the arrest of their parent.
- Reentry programs and services should address the need to rebuild parent/child relationships.

Learn more about the Osborne Association's New York Initiative for Children of Incarcerated Parents at www.osborneny.org. For the complete report, *Children of Incarcerated Parents In New York State - A Data Analysis*, go to www.doocs.ny.gov/NewsRoom/children_of_incarcerated.

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 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



Barbara Bush Foundation Announces “Devotedly Dad” Letter Writing Contest

Nearly 25 years ago, former First Lady Barbara Bush started her passionate quest to ensure families across the country could read. Her belief was simple – *if you help a person learn to read, their opportunities in life are endless.*

Many years ago Barbara Bush visited prisons and included incarcerated individuals in her literacy efforts. At the age of 87 she is still very active and her daughter Doro Bush is taking up the same cause, speaking at various conferences.

Today, the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy is a growing national movement. Co-Chairs Jeb Bush and Doro Bush Koch lead the charge, while their “mom” and Honorary Chair remains actively engaged to give parents and children the opportunity to learn and grow together. The Barbara Bush Foundation supports families and local communities nationwide, each year awarding millions of dollars to successful family literacy programs. Literacy programs serving incarcerated parents are eligible to compete for the Barbara Bush Foundation grants.

This year the Barbara Bush Foundation is sponsoring the “Devotedly Dad” letter contest. The contest is open to America’s fathers and grandfathers as an opportunity to encourage a love of reading and writing in their homes. The Barbara Bush Foundation is asking dads to write a letter to a child or grandchild about the importance of literacy and learning – to write from the heart, the head or the funny bone and simply sign it ... “Devotedly, Dad.”

Last month, CEA Executive Director Steve Steurer received a phone call from the Senior Vice President of the Barbara Bush Foundation, Elizabeth Hirst, saying they are including incarcerated fathers in the contest and asking CEA to help them get the word out.

Winners will receive an autographed copy of *All the Best, My Life in Letters and Other Writings* by President George H.W. Bush, plus a pair of his favorite and fun First Family socks!

Contest Rules:

- Original letters (maximum word count 800) must be submitted by fathers or grandfathers.
- Submit letter online at www.BarbaraBushFoundation.com or mail it to Barbara Bush Foundation, 516 North Adams Street, Tallahassee, FL 32301.
- **Deadline for submissions is 5 p.m. EST – May 30, 2013.**
- They are looking for letter writers across America – two favorite letters per state will be selected.
- Winners will be notified by email on Father’s Day, June 16, 2013. Select letters will be featured on the Barbara Bush Foundation website, www.BarbaraBushFoundation.com.
- All entries, upon the sole discretion of the Barbara Bush Foundation, may be published in full or excerpt form, online or in print/broadcast form via the Barbara Bush Foundation, news organizations or other publications.

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 800 parenting educators from 29 states who are eager to help. Just send an email to JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com with your question or request. Then wait a few days and the helpful responses will be sent to you.



Editor's Musings:

I have been writing "musings" for about three years — and this is my last as your editor. I work with many dads who are separated from their children, as do you. I want to share with you what one of the dads who participated in a book-sharing program recently reported. He said that if I needed a testimonial about the program, he could give me one. He simply said, "It worked." He had had little contact with his son, who lived states away from Wisconsin. He thought he'd send one of the DVDs along with a book to his son, just to see if he could reestablish a relationship.

He apparently chose the book well — his son wrote to him and was very excited about the book. The boy's mom thought it was a wonderful gift. They recently visited Illinois, but made a side trip Wisconsin to visit Dad in prison. Now both Mom and the boy are in regular correspondence, and they are working through things that had been left unsaid and undone years ago.

It's easy to think that these programs are a lot of work, and there are so many other things to do, and you're swamped right now, and ... and ... and. But then, when you hear what a difference it can make, suddenly it doesn't seem like a chore at all!

I wish you all well as I take my leave.

Barb Rasmussen

To join CEA go to: www.ceanational.org

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