

# Parenting Connection

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## Sesame Street Unveils Initiative for Young Children with an Incarcerated Parent

In response to the growing number of children with an incarcerated parent and few resources existing to support young children and families with this life-changing circumstance, Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit educational organization behind Sesame Street, unveiled its newest, bilingual (English/Spanish) initiative, *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration*. The new initiative is designed to help families with young children (ages 3–8) who have an incarcerated parent to develop skills for resilience.

Sesame Workshop believes, “The incarceration of a loved one can be very overwhelming for both children and caregivers. It can bring about big changes and transitions. In simple everyday ways, you can comfort your child and guide her through these tough moments. With your love and support she can get through anything that comes her way.”

Sesame Workshop’s message to caregivers is, “Though the incarceration of a loved one brings about many challenges, it also provides an opportunity to show your child how much you love and care for him. Your love and support are the most important things to help him cope with this difficult change.” The *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* initiative has designed some tools to help caregivers navigate some of the transitions and challenges that a parent's incarceration can bring.

Sesame workshop also sees service providers as playing an important role in helping families cope with the incarceration of a loved one. “With your support and guidance, families can discover that they can get through anything together. You know your audience best, so choose the resources that will work in your setting.” The *Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* initiative has created resources specifically for service providers to help them guide the caregivers and children through the changes they encounter.

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# Conference to Highlight Research on the Young Children of Jailed Parents

On October 25 at the *Conference on the Young Children of Jailed Parents Research Project*, Dr. Julie Poehlman, Professor and Chair of Human Development and Family Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison, will share the results from a 16-month study at the Racine County Jail which was funded by the National Institutes of Health. Participants will also learn about resources to support children and families and help develop local strategies.

The *Young Children of Jailed Parents Project* is a partnership of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UW-Extension/Cooperative Extension/Family Living Programs and jails in Racine, Dane and Sauk counties. UW-Madison campus researchers and specialists along with Racine County and Sauk County Family Living Educators and jail officials partnered to provide leadership for this study of young children with jailed parents.

Early in 2011, the project was submitted as a grant proposal to the National Institutes of Health and received a favorable score. Official notification on funding from the National Institutes of Health occurred in the fall of 2011.

The goals of this study are to better understand and offer recommendations for child-friendly jail visits and to better understand the impact of parental incarceration on young children. Children who have an incarcerated parent are at risk for problems at home, in school and in their communities. Research though is lacking on young children who have a parent incarcerated in local jails. In fact, no studies have rated the quality of children's visits with incarcerated parents.

The *Young Children of Jailed Parents Project* rated children's visits in the jail as well as interviewed and observed these children at home, with their caregiver, with the jailed parent, and surveyed the child's teacher or child care provider. Findings from this project will help to create recommendations for children's visits with jailed parents and develop actions to help prepare children for visits. While this information has obvious potential benefits for the children and their families, it is also expected to hold value for the jails.

Observations of the jail visits between jailed parents and their 2-6 year old children as well as the interviews with jailed parents took place in Racine, Dane and Sauk county jails. Interviews and observations with the child and the child's caregiver occurred in the living environment of the child. Training, data analysis and other research functions took place on the UW-Madison campus.

Registration details for the Conference on Young Children of Incarcerated Parents will be posted at <http://racine.uwex.edu> or contact Beverlee Baker, Family Living Educator, Racine County UW-Extension at [beverlee.baker@goracine.org](mailto:beverlee.baker@goracine.org).

For more information on the *Young Children of Jailed Parents Project* and the *Conference on the Young Children of Jailed Parents* contact:

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# Five Years Later: Lessons Learned from Implementation of MFS-IP Grants

At the American Correctional Association Conference on August 13, 2013, researchers from RTI International presented a session summarizing their evaluation of family strengthening grants done for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners (MFS-IP) funded services to support families in which one parent was incarcerated or recently released. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families provided up to \$500,000 per year for five years to twelve grantees.

This initiative was an innovative approach to reducing recidivism by strengthening families, and required new collaborative relationships between corrections and human services agencies. At the time the initiative was conceived, little was known about what strategies might be effective for delivering family strengthening services to incarcerated and reentering fathers and their families. The agencies to which these grants were awarded were diverse in terms of service delivery history, organizational focus, and agency type. The grantee diversity also translated into varied implementation goals and strategies. Recognizing that there was much to be learned from these pioneering programs, HHS funded a national implementation and impact evaluation of the grantees.

The MFS-IP implementation evaluation shed light on characteristics associated with implementation success. The MFS-IP implementation evaluation explored lessons learned from more than six years of involvement in family strengthening in corrections and identified common elements of program design, organizational capacity, and operational strategy that shaped grantees' successes and failures in bringing their programs to scale. These implementation findings can help inform ongoing work with families in correctional and reentry settings. A detailed technical report on final implementation study findings and all other study reports are available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/> and <https://mfs.rti.org/>.

## Legacy of the MFS-IP Initiative

One year after their MFS-IP grants ended, program leaders described a lasting impact of the initiative on their own work, their organizations, and their communities. Many sites attributed the following changes to MFS-IP program implementation:

- More recognition among state correctional administrators and state prison staff of the importance of family relationships in reentry
- More competence and familiarity on the part of community organizations in serving reentering men and their families
- Enduring partnerships, particularly between corrections and community agencies, and also among community agencies specializing in prison-based service delivery and those specializing in community-based service delivery (e.g., employment, housing, substance abuse treatment, and child services agencies)
- The initiation or strengthening of community-wide reentry councils or other interagency efforts
- Improved data sharing between corrections and human services agencies
- More recognition of the importance of a case management or case advocacy approach in serving incarcerated and reentering fathers

## Implications for Reentry Collaboratives

For those working to support reentry through collaboration among correctional agencies, community-based reentry organizations, employers, housing providers, and others serving reentering persons and their families, the evaluation findings suggest:



- To lay the groundwork for productive collaboration on family skills interventions for justice-involved families, it is important to create opportunities for local domestic violence agencies, correctional agencies, and human services agencies to network and build relationships. Support is also needed for local human services and domestic violence agencies in their effort to understand the culture and protocol of local correctional agencies and identify unmet programming needs in the corrections and community supervision systems.
- To keep family skills programming relevant and responsive within a changing justice system, identify whether local correctional systems are moving (or have moved) toward risk-based program assignment. If so, explore ways to incorporate family skills programming into this framework. Programs should also identify and use validated risk assessment tools to assess risk, target family skills program participants for the greatest potential impact, and separate participants by risk level when providing programming.

### **Implications for Program Designers and Curriculum Developers**

Examining successes and failures among the array of program models and curricula implemented by MFS-IP grantees, several lessons emerge for designing future programs in this area:

- To reach justice-involved families at times of greatest need and readiness, begin working with participants early in the incarceration term (such as at the time of a father’s admission to prison) and continue working with them after release.
- To maximize fit between program design and target population, deliver couples-based program components in one-time or short-term formats (e.g., weekend seminars). Also consider providing extended coursework and services to incarcerated fathers without requiring partner participation.
- To increase the potential for personal transformation in family strengthening programs, combine family skills education with cognitive behavioral skill-building that helps participants to change their thinking patterns and emphasize the potential for positive identity development among incarcerated and reentering men through meaningful family relationships such as fatherhood.

### **Implications for Potential Funders**

Successful implementation is a key prerequisite for building program models that can be rigorously tested. Strategies for program development suggested by the MFS-IP evaluation include:

- To support the most efficient use of funding resources, allow and encourage grantees to “cast a wide net” with regard to program enrollment: defining program eligibility criteria broadly, and providing as many points of entry into the program as possible (e.g., working with multiple prison facilities and/or multiple community venues serving released fathers).
- To help programs meet their enrollment targets and better retain participants, permit grantees to offer incentives that are specifically meaningful to incarcerated fathers and their partners (e.g., time credits, special visitation opportunities, storybooks or school uniforms for children).
- To increase the perceived relevance of programming aimed at improving family relationship skills, require grantees to provide ancillary services that meet families’ practical needs, such as assistance with job training and placement, child support order modification, housing placement, and public benefits applications.
- To identify applicants with organizational capacity for serving incarcerated fathers and their partners, prioritize those with experience delivering programmatic interventions in highly-structured environments, a history of strong corrections-community partnerships, and/or strong partnerships between fatherhood/reentry agencies and domestic violence organizations.

This initiative brought together organizations from fields that had not historically collaborated — corrections, human services, and domestic violence agencies — in support of healthy relationships, positive parenting, and economic stability among justice-involved families. The efforts of these pioneering practitioners have yielded insights that identify effective approaches for serving parents and children affected by incarceration.



# Symposium to Highlight Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children and Youth

The Children, Youth & Family Consortium (CYFC) of the University of Minnesota-Extension will be hosting a symposium on November 14, 2013 to highlight the too often silent population of children and youth with an incarcerated parent. The *Lessons from the Field: Impact of Parental Incarceration on Children and Youth* symposium will feature "Mothers of Bedford," a documentary film about Bedford Hills, a maximum security prison, and the lives of incarcerated women and their families. Symposium presenters will include: Erica Gerrity, Isis Rising; Jen McShane, Documentarian; Ebony Ruhland, Criminal Justice System; Daniel Marcou, Hennepin County Libraries; Rebecca Shlafer, University of Minnesota.

The Children, Youth & Family Consortium works to improve the lives of children, youth, and families by supporting and creating programs are intended to:

- Design, implement, and evaluate evidence-based educational programs to enhance community professionals' practices and inform policies relevant to children, youth, and families
- Generate or facilitate research relevant to practice and policymaking on the issues and needs of children, youth, and families
- Engage communities in respectful, reciprocal partnerships aimed at reducing inequities in educational and health outcomes for children, youth, and families
- Infuse principles of engagement, research and an ecological perspective to enhance programs working to promote positive educational and health outcomes for children, youth, and families
- Create a supportive academic culture for community-engaged scholarship

Registration information will be posted soon at <http://www1.extension.umn.edu/family/cyfc/>.

## Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative Hosts 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Fatherhood Summit

The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative, in partnership with Social Development Commission will host it's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, "Changing Milwaukee Through Male Empowerment" on Friday, October 4th and Saturday, October 5, 2013 at the Destiny Youth Plaza, 7210 North 76<sup>th</sup> Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The event is free and open to the public!

The Fatherhood Summit includes:

- Group Discussions – Overcoming life challenges fathers face
- Health Care – Learn how to enroll in the President's new affordable health plan available beginning October 1, 2013
- Health Fair – Screenings
- Job & Resource Fair
- Child Support Case Reviews
- Driver's License Recovery
- Summit Mentors

Summit Schedule:

- Friday General Assembly 7:30am – 3:30pm
- Grandfather's Event 5:30pm (Networking); 6:00pm (Dinner/Presentation)
- Saturday General Assembly 7:30am -2:00pm
- Onsite Registration begins at 7:15 am

Preregistration is encouraged. Go to [www.MilwaukeeFatherhood.com](http://www.MilwaukeeFatherhood.com) or [www.cr-sdc.org](http://www.cr-sdc.org).



# Toolkit Bridges Child Welfare/Prison Divide

Roughly 10% of incarcerated mothers in state prison have a child in a foster home or other state care. Some estimates indicate that as many as 1 in 8 children who are subjects of reports of maltreatment and investigated by child welfare agencies have parents who were recently arrested. Though there is clearly overlap between the prison system and the child welfare system, it is often difficult for prison officials to know how to help incarcerated parents stay in touch with their children in foster care and work towards reunification. Similarly, it is difficult for child welfare agencies to know how to engage parents in prison.

To address this problem, the Federal Interagency Working Group for Children of Incarcerated Parents has created *Children in Foster Care with Parents in Federal Prison: A Toolkit for Child Welfare Agencies, Federal Prisons, and Residential Reentry Centers*. The purpose of the toolkit is to help facilitate communication and cooperation between child welfare agencies and federal prisons so that parents can stay engaged in their children's lives.

Included in the toolkit is:

- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Social Workers - This resource explains common questions social workers may have when managing cases of children with parents in federal prison, such as “how do I locate a parent in federal prison” or “how can I communicate with a parent in federal prison?”
- FAQs for Unit Teams – This resource explains common questions unit teams in federal prisons may have when working with incarcerated parents with children in foster care, such as “how can an incarcerated parent locate their child in foster care?” or “what are ways an incarcerated parent can work towards reunifying with his or her children once they leave prison?”
- FAQs for Residential Reentry Centers (RRCs) – This resource explains common questions for staff at RRCs, such as, “how can I determine if an incarcerated parent still has custody?” or “what can the individual do to help ease the transition back with their family?”
- Glossary of Commonly Used Terms – Some of the terms used in this toolkit may be unfamiliar. This glossary will help unit teams and social workers understand the common terms and processes of federal prisons and child welfare agencies.
- Child Welfare Myth Buster – This myth buster explains that not all parents in prison automatically lose their parental rights.
- Incarceration Timeline – This timeline provides general information about the incarceration process from arrest to release.
- Child Welfare Timeline – This timeline provides general information about the child welfare system’s process from initial report and the child’s placement in foster care to case planning and working towards a permanent solution.
- State Child Welfare Agency Contact Information – This is the contact information for State child welfare agencies.
- Additional Resources – Several pages of additional resources may be helpful for child welfare, federal prison, or residential reentry center staff.

The toolkit *Children in Foster Care with Parents in Federal Prison* may be accessed at: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/COIP-Toolkit.pdf>

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



## **Editor's Message:**

Momentum for providing programs to meet the needs of the children of incarcerated parents is continuing to grow. In this newsletter you will find information on research into the impact that parental incarceration has on children, conferences that encourage service providers to share ideas, resources for caregivers and service providers, and the Sesame Workshop initiative designed to help families with young children who have an incarcerated parent.

The scope of agencies becoming involved in this issue also continues to grow. Community agencies, faith-based groups, and public schools are joining correctional educators in providing parenting classes for offenders, mentoring for their children, and creative opportunities for encouraging incarcerated parents to maintain contact with their children and their caregivers. These efforts are being recognized on the local level, by state governments and, recently by the Federal Departments of Education and Health and Human Services and the White House.

If you are aware of initiatives that are occurring in your state, we are interested in hearing about them and featuring them in this newsletter. Send me an email so we can share information on these initiatives.

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