

Parenting Connection

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Use the First 15 Minutes of Your Parenting Class to Build Executive Functions

In a survey of CEA Parenting Connection newsletter readers, 51% of responders told me that the biggest challenge they face using packaged classroom curricula is that these curricula often do not take into account that their learners are trauma-impacted and struggle with executive functions.

In response, and to thank you for taking the time to complete the survey, here are practical things you can do in the first 15 minutes of your parenting class to help your trauma-impacted learners reduce their anxiety and build critical executive functions needed to achieve their parenting goals.

What are executive functions?

1. **Inhibitory control:** This is the capacity to resist reactive behavior.
2. **Working memory:** This is the ability to hold on to and work with information in our minds for short amounts of time.
3. **Mental flexibility:** This is the capacity to go with the flow and adjust and respond appropriately to a change in instructions, viewpoints, or priorities.¹

Why are executive functions so critical for incarcerated parents?

Beth Babcock² says that the very skills people with complex life challenges need in order to develop sustainable, goal driven habits to climb out of poverty (or re-enter society after incarceration), are the very skills they may be lacking. Skills such as juggling competing demands, moving to Plan B when Plan A isn't working, or keeping emotions under control when circumstances become frustrating require a set of skills known as executive functions that include capacities for inhibitory control, working memory and mental flexibility.

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What happened to cause this lack of skills?

A lack of well-developed executive functions can be the result of persistent, toxic stress leading to trauma-impact that prevented the development of these skills when your learners were children. Examples of toxic stressors that some incarcerated learners may have experienced while growing up include child abuse or neglect, poverty, parental addiction or mental health challenges, natural disasters, an incarcerated parent, domestic violence, systemic racism/historical trauma, or exposure to violence growing up in an unsafe neighborhood.³

What's going on in their brains?

Those who suffer toxic stress in childhood may experience poor connectivity between the emotion and thinking centers of the brain. When they experience sensory input as adults – sights, sounds, smells or touch that are triggering for them, their stress response is activated and they respond impulsively to protect themselves from a perceived threat, rather than responding using the skills that executive functions provide for them.

Because they react out of fear, many times their response may not serve their goals. What you may see in class from trauma-impacted learners is a lack of curiosity or exploring behavior; resistance to risk-taking, starting a task, responding to questions, or considering alternative viewpoints; anxiety; missing class; aggression; or a glazed, checked-out affect.⁴

How you can help?

The good news is that there are things you can do in your classroom to help learners calm their reactivity and begin to build better connectivity between the emotion and thinking centers of their brain. Following are some helpful practices you can add to the first 15 minutes of your parenting class or build in as processes as you teach.

Start class with Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction activities

1. **Progressive Relaxation:** Invite learners to participate in a guided practice in which they sit relaxed in their chairs as you quietly talk them through relaxing each part of their body from their toes to their head. As your course progresses, invite students to lead the relaxation exercise.
2. **Focused Breathing:** Invite learners to join you as you talk them through a few rounds of focused breathing in which they exhale completely through their mouth, then breathe in through their nose for a count of four, hold their breath for a count of seven, and then exhale through their mouth for a count of eight. Again, after several weeks, invite learners to lead the exercise.
3. **Stop and Think⁵:** When parents get upset in class ask them if they'd be willing to do some focused breathing to give themselves a chance to calm down (stop) and then think. Once a parent feels a bit calmer, ask him/her, "Does the action you want to take help you reach your goals? If not, would you like some help in thinking of an action that might better fit what you want?"

How much time will it take?

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction has been shown to help people feel calmer, think more clearly, feel less depressed, reduce frustration, enjoy a greater sense of well-being, and improve parent-child relationships⁶, all for about 5 minutes per day of your class time. I have used these activities with great success in prison and community parenting classes with trauma-impacted adult learners.

Cast a vision and build a learning community around it⁷

A successful and rewarding classroom strategy for students and teachers alike is to cast a vision of who your learners are becoming by using the goals, characteristics and qualities they have shared are important to them to frame that vision. The literature refers to this as a "holding environment"⁸ where development and healing have the space and nurture to grow.



Language and modeling are critically important here. When I have done this I refer to learners as Moms or Dads when addressing them. When parent learners refer to “being back on the streets” I will say, “You aren’t doing all of this good work in this class to return to the streets, you are preparing yourself to return to your community.”

When a mom or dad expresses a desire to take a rash action due to upset they’ve experienced in class or a setback they’ve encountered in their attempts to connect with their children, I frequently ask, “How will that response help you achieve the hopes and dreams you have for your child?” “How will that response help your child reach the goals you’ve said are important to you as a parent?” I always point them back to what’s important to them and then ask if they’d like help from the group thinking of alternative actions that are a better fit for *their* goals.

These things may seem small, but it doesn’t feel small when I hear incarcerated moms and dads refer to their parenthood rather than their crime, correct each other by replacing “streets” with “community”, or ask each other if quitting will help them help their kids!

How much time will it take?

Cast a vision your learners can step into. This requires no change at all in your lesson plan and only the time it takes to use vision casting and vision reminding language throughout your class period.

Teach parents about their brains

Teach parents that brains are plastic and can be shaped, changed and grown and that *they* can make that happen.^{9,10} By participating in class and putting effort into learning, especially when they *struggle* a bit with what they are learning, they are building new neural networks of knowledge. Research has shown that when learners understand and believe they can change their brains and grow their intelligence they work harder, persist through struggle, and make greater academic gains.^{11,12}

How much time will it take?

Support this in just seconds of your time by commenting on effort rather than natural talent, affirming stick-to-it-iveness during struggle, and celebrating hypothesis making, exploration and mistakes, all of which support the development of executive functions.

Start strong and gain buy-in for each day’s topic

To increase activity in students’ memory centers and the release of neurotransmitters which stimulate focus and engagement¹³, start each class with an engaging opening activity that relates your day’s topic directly to your learners’ goals, hopes and dreams while honoring their lived experience. This is your best chance of gaining your learners’ buy in for participating in the day’s session.

Good activities for stimulating engagement, focus, attention and motivation include topic-related humor or surprise, a counterintuitive but relevant statistic, a thought provoking question or inspiring story. Search online, in movies, in newspapers and magazines for topic-related short video clips, stories, poems, statistics, quotes or cartoons. Immerse your learners in the experience you’ve introduced and then pose a question, ask if they can relate, poll their opinions, and draw them into discussion or invite them to share their opinion. The goal here is to stimulate their memories, focus and gain their attention, and increase their motivation to actively participate in the day’s activity because they *feel connected* to the day’s topic. Wrap up the activity by sharing the lesson’s intended outcome and pointing out *how* the day’s session can support them in the things they just told you they feel strongly about.

How much time will it take?

Building in an engaging, neurotransmitter-producing opening activity may take you 10 minutes but you’ll
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make it up by not having to waste your time and energy coaxing, prodding, and reminding learners to stay on task and complete their work because you've taken the time to get them on board and relate their day's work to what they care about and their lived experience.

Reduce parent anxiety and set them up for success

1. **Offer lots of reminders.** If you teach outside of an institution, provide text message reminders about classwork, next class meetings or homework. Text reminders have been shown to increase engagement and follow through with the effective habits you are teaching in class.¹⁴ If you are in an institution, remind them or inquire about progress when you see them outside of the classroom.
2. **Provide lots of Success Checklists.** When you assign work, provide a Success Checklist to show what an excellent work product should include. Research shows that people perform better when they know and understand the criteria and standards for success.
3. **Provide a Comprehensive Course Checklist:** On the first day of class, provide a list of all work due and course requirements and their due dates. This breaks your big course down into manageable steps and tasks and helps reduce student anxiety. Keep one for each student and mark on it as they turn work in and invite each student to keep one for him/herself. At the halfway point through your class, collect student checklists and compare them with yours. Write a quick sticky note of encouragement for those who are on track. Create plans with students who are not on track or who have a very different interpretation of where they are than you have. These early alerts increase the likelihood that students will get back on track and successfully complete a course.

How much time will it take?

Admittedly, #3 takes time. I deal with this by planning a catch up day in my courses, at the halfway point. I collect and compare the checklists in the session before the catch up day. On catch up day, I give back their checklists with my sticky note comments and allow students to use the day to work on incomplete work. I offer approved art materials for those who don't have any catch up work and/or invite them to make themselves available to help others who need extra support. I can then meet with those who require more one-on-one help, to put a plan in place for catching up. This is time-consuming but invaluable in supporting mental flexibility and building the executive skills of goal setting and action planning and thinking in terms of "Plan B" – a critical executive function when faced with multiple life challenges.

Use worksheets for goal setting, action planning and self-monitoring

Create a worksheet learners can use for goal setting, action planning and self-monitoring.¹⁵ I use these after the engaging opening activity and the sharing of the intended outcome. I invite learners to set an outcome related goal for themselves and record it on the worksheet. Students revisit this worksheet for both progress monitoring and self-evaluation of goal achievement using guided reflection questions that build executive functions.

For example, if I'm teaching a class on effective listening, after showing a provocative clip in which someone demonstrates very poor listening and asking learners to describe similar experiences and how those experiences made them feel, I then share the intended outcome. The intended outcome for this session might be: *You will use effective listening ("I'm listening" verbal feedback and body language, reflecting back what you hear, and acknowledging how the other feels) on a phone call, in a visit, or in a letter, in an effort to improve a relationship in your life.*¹⁶

Then I invite learners to set a learning goal including WHOM they'd like to target with their improved listening skills and WHEN and HOW they will pursue this goal. Learners return to this worksheet to monitor their progress, adapt their plan, build their repertoire of strategies for achieving their goal, and record their learning accomplishments – all of which builds their executive functions.



How will you use the first 15 minutes of your parenting class to build executive functions in your learners?

If you would like a copy of a reproducible goal setting, action planning and self-monitoring worksheet for building executive functions in your learners as they monitor their progress in your course, please visit me at www.tracyschiffmann.com/resource-library. You can access the worksheet and sign up for regular brain-based curriculum design and teaching tips for trauma-impacted adult learners that touch hearts, change minds and transform behavior.

by: *Tracy Schiffmann, Ed.M.*
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Booklet Answers FAQs

Since 2008, the Institute for Municipal & Regional Policy (IMRP) at Central Connecticut State University has been receiving annual funding from the Connecticut General Assembly to administer competitive grants for providing positive interventions for at-risk youth whose parents or family members have been incarcerated. To do this, the IMRP established the Children of Incarcerated Parents Initiative (CIP). The CIP Initiative continually seeks to expand the understanding of these children and their service needs through research, evaluation and outreach activities.

When someone faces a potential term of incarceration, they and their loved ones can experience a lot of uncertainty and confusion. To help families deal with this uncertainty, the Connecticut CIP Initiative created a 28-page *Children with Incarcerated Parents Initiative Frequently Asked Questions* booklet to be a resource for those preparing to serve a term of imprisonment, people returning from prison, and the people that care for them. This document is available on the CIP Initiative website: www.CtCIP.org.

Tell Us About Your Program
Email your article to:
JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com



Federal Officials Hear the Stories of Youth with Incarcerated Parents

On June 28-29, 2016 a two-day listening session with youth who have or have had incarcerated parents was held in Washington DC. This listening session was supported by the Office of Human Services Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation at the US Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the US Department of Justice. It was organized by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), through the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, and the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated (NRCCFI) at Rutgers University, Camden, NJ.

This historic event was the first time that youth with incarcerated parents were brought together from all parts of the US to not only discuss the issues and concerns they and their families face but also to present their stories and recommendations to senior officials in various agencies of the federal government.

Attendees included 19 youth between the ages of 15 and 23, from 13 states. They shared their experiences of having incarcerated mothers or fathers and sometimes both parents. They talked about the challenges and struggles as well as the supports and programs that helped them. And they told federal officials how policies and practices could be more helpful to them and their families.

Ann Adalist-Estrin, NRCCFI Director, recruited the youth by connecting with a wide variety of agencies and organizations that serve children and families of the incarcerated. She also co-facilitated the Listening Session with AIR representatives including David Osher, Vice President; Mary Thorngren, Principal Project Specialist; Simon Gonsoulin, Principal Researcher; and Juliette-Marie deSousa, Senior Researcher.

NRCCFI and AIR will now work with the youth to create two documents from the information gathered at this Listening Session: *A Tip Sheet for Youth with Incarcerated Parents* and a *Tip Sheet for Service Providers Working with Children and Families of the Incarcerated*. These publications will be available soon on www.Youth.gov.

Assisting AIR and NRCCFI with this process were the following programs:

- Arkansas Voices for the Children of the Incarcerated, Little Rock, AR
- Big Brothers Big Sisters of Flagstaff, AZ
- Pima Prevention Partnership in Tucson, AZ
- Pops The Club in Los Angeles, CA
- Project WHAT, San Francisco, CA
- Connecticut CIP Project at Central Connecticut State University
- Circles and Ciphers, Chicago, IL
- US Dream Academy Indianapolis Center
- The Family Connections Center, New Hampshire Department of Corrections
- Osborne Association, New York, NY
- Our Children's Place at Coastal Horizons Center, Inc., Durham, NC
- Northwest Family Services, Portland, OR
- Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, Philadelphia, PA
- Amachi Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA
- Seedling Foundation, Austin, TX

The youth from these agencies were a representative sample of the estimated 2.7 million U.S. children, or 1 in 28, that have a parent in prison or jail. Despite their strength and resilience, the shame and stigma



associated with parental incarceration and the pain of separation from parents was a part of most of their stories. Some youth had experience telling their stories but many had chosen not to discuss their circumstances with others until this Listening Session. As one youth said “This group felt just like a family after only two days,” reminding us of the importance of providing opportunities for children of the incarcerated to connect with each other.

This gathering of youth and the materials they will create will help to continue the unprecedented focus that the Obama Administration has had on Children of the Incarcerated.

For some of the stories at the Listening Session presented by youth with incarcerated parents, go to: <http://www.hhs.gov/blog/2016/07/05/hhs-and-doj-host-listening-session-youth.html>.

Wanted: Stories about Kids, Guns and How to Stop the Violence

Precious Lives, created by *371 Productions*, is a 2-year, 100-part weekly radio/podcast/print series about gun violence and young people in the Milwaukee area that explores the impact of gun violence on the community at large. The series applies a public health lens to each story to help listeners understand the full scope of the problem: who are the victims and the shooters; how are the weapons obtained; and what can we change about the environment that contributes to violence in Milwaukee?

Precious Lives series was created in collaboration with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, WUWM, WNOV, and the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism.

The goal of the project is to reveal the truths, tears and triumphs related to gun violence. The stories are intended to give voice to many people not represented in mainstream media, creating sustained attention to this persistent problem and showcasing solutions many don't know about.

Aisha Turner, a producer with *371 Productions*, would like to include stories from those incarcerated in Wisconsin prisons and jails in the Precious Lives series. To get feedback from people whose perspective is normally difficult to get, Aisha is asking teachers who work in corrections to encourage their students to submit a brief synopsis of their story of how gun violence has impacted themselves, their family and their community. These stories can be from perpetrators of gun violence, victims, or people don't have a “direct” connection, but that feel gun violence significantly impacted their environment. Shorter is better. Those submitting stories should try to stay under three pages.

Aisha would like to know what people think are the potential causes and solutions to the problem of gun violence. She would also like to encourage people to think about whether their experiences around gun violence tie into any of these themes:

- foster care
- domestic violence
- access to mental health services/access to strategies for coping with trauma
- employment
- housing
- parenting

If selected, Aisha will contact the teacher and the student to arrange more communication or an interview to get more material for possible inclusion in the *Precious Lives* series.

Episodes from the Precious Lives may be found at www.preciouslivesproject.org. Synopses of student stories should be submitted to Aisha Turner at aisha@371productions.com.



Summit Plants Seeds to Grow Stronger Fathers and Families

The stage has been set. On Friday, October 7 through Saturday, October 8, 2016, Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative in partnership with the Social Development Commission will host its Annual Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, "Planting Seeds to Grow Stronger Fathers and Families." The event will be held at the Greater New Birth Church and Christian Campus located at 8237 W. Silver Spring Drive in Milwaukee.

Men from around the Milwaukee area will mark the 11th year of getting the access to the resources to become more engaged and effective fathers. The two-day event will bring more than 1,000 men together to discuss the challenges that hinder their ability to be successful fathers. The Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit will identify solutions and provide resources to promote positive father roles and address the many obstacles that prevent men from being more involved in the parenting process.

The guiding principle for this year's event is to concentrate the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative efforts on "service delivery" and to encourage greater interaction between service providers and summit participants.

This year's Summit focus areas are:

- On-site Child Support Case Reviews
- Driver's License Recovery - On-site traffic case reviews
- Health Information and Screening
- Education - GED/HSED, trades, CDL, etc.
- Job Fair/Employment opportunities linking to city and regional jobs
- Job Training Opportunities - Skilled trades
- Family Court Services - Bankruptcies, child placement, etc.
- Resource Fair - Other community service providers

Volunteers will assist in helping the fathers get the most out of the day by coaching them through understanding the challenges that exist and recommending the resources that are available on-site to address it.

Register on the Social Development Commission website: www.cr-sdc.org or contact Policy & Research Manager Diane Robinson at 414-906-2804 or drobenson@cr-sdc.org for more information.

Need Help?



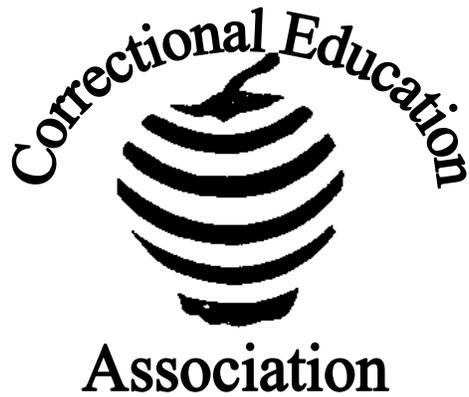
Do you have any questions or need some advice on starting or improving your parenting classes, parent/child literacy program, or parent support group for offenders?

We have an email list of experienced parenting educators who are eager to help. Just send an email to 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.

To join CEA go to: www.ceanational.org



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Editor's Message:

It is well documented that trauma can interfere with a child's brain development, learning, and behavior – all of which have a potential impact on a child's academic success and social development. These effects often follow the child into adulthood and influence his/her ability to learn to be a good parent.

The first step is to understand who experiences trauma and how it impacts their learning and lives. Articles in this newsletter talk about projects that give voice to children who have experienced trauma so we may better understand their life experiences. The cover article gives practical suggestions to help educators reduce trauma's negative impact, support critical learning, and create a more positive learning environment.

If you have other ideas for addressing the needs of trauma-impacted learners in your parenting program, you are invited to share them with other parenting instructors by contributing an article to this newsletter. We would like to hear from you.

Jerry

