

# Parenting Connection

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## Parents Place Provides Triple P Programming for Incarcerated Parents

by: Kathy Duffek, CBSW, Community Education Coordinator, Parents Place Inc.

Parents Place, Inc. is a non-profit Family Resource Center. The mission of Parents Place is to provide quality family programming and prevention services to families that are at risk or have experienced child abuse and neglect. Programming is comprehensive and addresses the many difficulties parents and caregivers face as well as providing key programs for the children, themselves. Parents Place believes in improving the quality of life for all families through intervention, prevention, and parenting education.

In the fall of 2017, our agency entered into a collaboration with Waukesha County Technical College. The collaboration targets incarcerated mothers. The college provides basic adult education while Parents Place provides the evidence-based Triple P Parenting program. Triple P can be administered one-on-one or in a group setting through workshops and seminars. The Triple P approach to parenting helps families build safe, stable and nurturing relationships. The approach is about more than just memorizing and following rules. It is about gaining the skills and confidence to handle the ups and downs together. Triple P is evidence-based and trauma-informed, methodology varies based on the level of support needed.

Parents Place Triple P providers help the mothers develop positive skills to manage stress and encourage healthy habits. Through Triple P programming parents:

- Find the right level of support
- Set their own priorities and goals
- Decide what works for their families
- Tailor strategies to their unique needs
- Develop a personal plan

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The collaboration with Waukesha County Technical College has been such a success partly because, as a family resource center, we offer inmates a direct link to the community upon release. Along with a series of seminars and workshops for Triple P, we offer other support systems and opportunities for families.

Through our Supervised Visitation, many recently released parents visit their child for the first time since they were sentenced. This program allows children who have been separated from their families the opportunity to maintain a relationship with their parent while a permanency plan is being formulated. Reunification is a process, and building trust is a critical component, especially in cases of maltreatment and addiction.

Our programming includes other offerings like Parenting while in Recovery and Inside Out Dads. Inside Out Dads is a program of the National Fatherhood Initiative. This program bridges the gap between fathers and children and supports the father in reconnecting after incarceration. Parents learn new skills and receive the support necessary for success from an organization they are already familiar and comfortable with. The many offerings at Parents Place provides crucial ongoing support for all families, especially those in crisis.

Entering the third year, the programming has expanded to Dads in jail. Participants in Inside Out Dads, as well as mothers in the Triple Program, recognize and believe in their ability to provide positive learning experiences to their children and build safe, healthy relationships.

The success and unique quality of our program is our ability to provide on-going support and build on skills through educational opportunities. Through the Triple P Parenting, we provide families with up to ten weeks of mentoring and educational support. In addition, Parents Place has a strong community presence and connects families to resources that lead to long-term positive outcomes for parents and children.

At Parents Place, we believe that every child should have the right to grow up in a safe and loving home, with parents who care and are committed to providing for their well-being.

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## Children of Prison Inmates Program Continues to Grow

Reprinted from CLiF News, Summer 2019

Imagine being a parent separated from your children by prison walls. Imagine being a child able to see your parent only a few times a year. By some estimates, more than 20,000 children in Vermont and New Hampshire have a parent currently incarcerated.

Since 2003, Children's Literacy Foundation's (CLiF) Children of Prison Inmates Program has given thousands of these children positive experiences surrounding books and reading and helped their families stay connected through literacy. For many years, CLiF has worked with hundreds of inmates at the men's prisons in Berlin, New Hampshire and Concord, New Hampshire, and the women's prison in South Burlington, Vermont. The program has been so successful that it was added into the men's prison in Rutland, Vermont in 2018.

This year we're delighted to begin working with the women's prison in Concord. Commented Toni Viola, Correctional Counselor at that facility: "It is exciting to bring appreciation of the importance of literacy to these families, in a way only the CLiF presenters can."

In each prison CLiF provides: 1) regular seminars that help inmates be more comfortable and effective sharing books with their children; 2) new children's books for inmates to select and mail home to their kids; 3) special family literacy celebrations for inmates and their kids; and 4) the opportunity for inmates to record books on CD or MP3s and mail the books and recordings home to their children.

In a recent survey, 91% of inmates felt the CLiF program inspired their children to become more interested in reading and writing. Wrote one inmate: "Aiden looks forward to my books. After he reads them he either writes to me about it or tells me on the phone. He also always asks when I'm sending the next book. Being able to send books to him and his brothers has been very beneficial to staying connected with them." Just what we love to hear!

To find out more about CLiF's program and to support their efforts, go to [www.clifonline.org](http://www.clifonline.org).

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## Three Ways Incarcerated Fathers Can Help with Their Children's Education

*The following is excerpts from an article that originally appeared in the Summer 2018 Men's edition of Inside Journal, a quarterly newspaper printed by Prison Fellowship for correctional facilities across the country.*

If you have kids, you probably know education is critical to their success in life. Though it may be difficult for incarcerated parents to be involved from behind bars, it is still crucial for you to do so.

Studies show that kids with a father in prison are more likely to have a hard time in school or even drop out. You can help your child avoid these struggles. Even from behind bars, you can have a positive impact on your child's learning. (If you don't have kids, or your kids are grown, you can apply some of these same tips to grandkids, nieces, nephews, or other young people you can influence.)

### Set an Example

Being involved starts with being a positive role model. "It's hard to be what you didn't see," says Dr. Greg Austen, former director of national programming at the National Fatherhood Initiative, an organization that encourages fathers to be involved, responsible, and committed.

Fathers' actions and behaviors heavily influence their children's views. Show your child the value of education by getting your GED, enrolling in classes available at your facility, or taking a correspondence course.

It doesn't matter if you haven't hit the books in the past. It's never too late to start. If your children know you're learning, too, it will show them that you value education in your life — not just in theirs.

Education doesn't have to be formal, either. Demonstrate the value of self-guided learning. Check out books from the library. Take notes. Read the same books as your child and discuss them through letters or during calls or visits.

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## Communicate with Educators and Caregivers

Stay informed about what your children are learning and how they're performing in school. Depending on your facility, you may be able to call in to parent-teacher conferences covering your child's academic progress. You can request that your child's school send you copies of report cards or other important notices. Some schools might send you advance copies of your children's assignments so you can see what they're working on. If your children can send mail through a caregiver or family member, ask them to send recent schoolwork.

Communication goes both ways, too. If you hear that your child is struggling to learn or follow the rules at school, you can encourage your child's caregiver to talk to the teacher and school counselor, explain the situation at home, and come up with positive ways to give your child extra support when needed.

## Be the Dad Your Child Needs

Fathers play a unique and irreplaceable role in their children's lives. According to Dr. Austen, that role includes being a guide — helping children find their way in a world that can be disorienting, overwhelming, and discouraging.

With a parent in prison, your child's world may be especially challenging. Your child might be told that they will never amount to anything, or that they are destined to go to prison themselves. You can help by sending the opposite message. Tell your children that they matter — that they have value, abilities, and potential. If they know you believe in them, it will be easier for them to believe they can succeed.

Parenting from prison is hard. There are challenges at every turn, and regrets about the past might make you doubt whether you can help. By choosing to be involved in your children's education today, you can show them that you want to be the involved, responsible, and committed father they deserve. While you can't change your past, you can change your future—and you can help shape theirs.

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## Pilot Project in Dane County Jail Looks to Increase Children's Literacy

By Amy Reid, [www.channel3000.com](http://www.channel3000.com)

A new project in the Dane County Jail hopes to change lives not just for the people housed there but their children too.

With stickers and animals that are now on the walls, the visitation room at the jail looks more like a playhouse. What may seem like a simple change from what it used to look like has had a big impact, especially for the people who work there and saw the toll visits could take on young children.

"It's really heartbreaking watching children crying for their parents when they leave," said Susan Whitbeck, a security support specialist at the jail. "This environment just lightens the load, and it just brings a little more happiness to their families."

The environment redesign is an important part of the greater goal UW Extension program specialists hope to accomplish here. They've created a space that is not just kid friendly, but educational.



The Dane County Jail Visitation room looks more like a playhouse now after new books and educational activities were added

The idea stems from research done at the university showing children of jailed parents often lag behind their peers in literacy skills such as reading, writing and even speaking.

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Mary Huser, a program specialist with UW Extension, wanted to put that research into practice. “If we can intervene at these very young ages,” Huser said, “and we can help families who are struggling with a lot of stressful situations with these literacy skills and building these vocabularies, that sets them on a more positive trajectory, and that's what we want to do.”

Along with changing the space to include brand new books and literacy-building games on the tables, they converted an old vending machine that allows kids to pick and keep a brand new book for free.

“It's really exciting to see the kids,” Whitbeck said. “They get so excited to get that token because they get to take it to the vending machine and actually get to press the buttons to get the book themselves.”

Whitbeck has been so excited by the change that she's built off it, working with the library to bring library card applications and reading toolkits for parents to the space as well.

Huser said, in addition to getting books to kids, the project is about building the parent-child relationship and the benefits that brings.

“It's not just the books,” she said. “It's the interaction between the adult, the parent, the caregiver and the child, and what we want to do is encourage these responsive positive relationships between parents and young children, and we want to do that no matter where parents and caregivers are.”

Whitbeck has noticed a difference. “The parents, the inmates, are actually having the kids sit on their laps,” she said. “And they're reading the books to them or they're doing the activities on the table.”

The change for inmates is noticeable to the sheriff as well. “It builds hope in an environment that traditionally, historically has decreased hope,” Sheriff Dave Mahoney said.

Dane County is one of six jails in Wisconsin that is part of this pilot project.

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## Oklahoma Messages Project Boosts Children's Self-Esteem

Oklahoma, incarcerates more women/mothers per capita than anywhere in the world, and is the second highest for men/dads. This means that tens of thousands of children go months or years without one or both of their parents, which creates anxiety, depression, anger and loss of interest in school for these children.

This led Executive Director Cheri Fuller and a few other compassionate people to found Oklahoma Messages Project, a nonprofit that exists solely to support kids of parents behind bars with creative, life-giving programs. Oklahoma Messages Project is a 5.01.c.3 nonprofit organization founded in July 2010 with the mission to serve the most vulnerable, at-risk children in Oklahoma communities: those who have incarcerated parents.

Oklahoma Messages Project operates a highly effective prevention and literacy program that makes positive differences in kids' lives and helps mitigate the damage of incarceration. By filming parents in prison reading books to their children, the Oklahoma Messages Project helps maintain and improve the parent-child relationship, boost literacy, and improve the child's social, emotional, and educational outcomes.

Each year, a team of Oklahoma Messages volunteers visits prisons across the state of Oklahoma for several months before Christmas, Mother's Day and Father's Day, and films parents reading books to their children and sharing personal messages. They send the completed videos, along with the book(s) that the parent reads, to the children in care of their guardians. The videos and books provide each child with a positive, loving message, and allow them read a bedtime story with Mom or Dad each night. It reminds each child that they are loved and not forgotten.

The Oklahoma Messages Project goal is to boost children's reading and literacy skills, reduce nightmares, anxiety, anger, and depression, and allow them to stay connected with their parents. As a result, they experience improved emotional well-being, less anger and acting out, and higher self-esteem which results in more successful outcomes at school and better relationships at home.

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After successfully launching pilot programs in two prisons in 2011, the Oklahoma Messages Project expanded to every one of the 17 public prisons in Oklahoma and serve over 8000 children whose parents are behind bars since its founding.

## **Why the Oklahoma Message Project works:**

### Reduces Anxiety

After participating in the Oklahoma Messages Project, 65% of the children who participated experienced less depression and sadness; 85% were happier and more peaceful; 55% experienced less anger, anxiety, and acting out.

### Boosts Self Esteem

78% of children who participated in the Oklahoma Messages Project had higher self-esteem; 88% had a better bond with their parent and caregiver. This increase in self-esteem allows them to be more successful in building healthy relationships.

### Improves Reading

72% of children who received messages from their parents showed improvement in reading; 59% had significantly more interest in school. This increases their likelihood of staying in school and staying out of prison.

## **Reasons Kids Need Parents to Read to Them:**

- Reading is fundamental and foundational to success in school! After 3rd grade, success in every subject depends on strong reading skills. If kids aren't becoming better readers, they start falling behind in school. They thrive when they can read well.
- What kids learn when parents read aloud is vital: Basic speech and communication abilities, a longer attention span, stronger concentration, and better memory — all skills children need to do well in school and life.
- Children who are read to by parents who do it in a fun way grow to love books. A whole new world is opened to them leading to a lifelong love of reading. We teach the parents how to read interactively to engage their children.

If you'd like to find out more about the Oklahoma Messages Project, volunteer or donate, go to their website [www.okmessagesproject.org](http://www.okmessagesproject.org).

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## Reducing Barriers to Family Connections while Parents Are in Prison or Jail

The Bureau of Justice Assistance and the National Institute of Corrections, in collaboration with the Urban Institute and Community Works West, have developed a set of model practices to facilitate parent-child communication and contact during parental incarceration. The document, *Model Practices for Parents in Prisons and Jails: Reducing Barriers to Family Connections*, details a set of family-friendly practices designed to help correctional agencies reduce barriers to parent-child contact and communication and help mitigate the harmful effects of a parent's incarceration on children and families. To accomplish this objective, it is suggested that correctional administrators (1) consider that children need and want to have a relationship with their incarcerated parents and vice versa; (2) allow incarcerated parents to take responsibility for their children; and (3) provide opportunities for families to communicate, interact, and bond. By implementing the practices outlined in this guide, it is thought that administrators will reduce the stress and confusion children experience when their parent is incarcerated while sustaining or maximizing safety and security in the facility.

### **What Is in This Guide?**

This document contains a set of low-cost, high-impact practices intended to guide correctional administrators in their efforts to support parent-child relationships. These practices hold promise for benefiting incarcerated parents and improving the lives of their children and families overall without compromising the safety and security of the correctional facility. The practices are suitable for a wide range of correctional facilities, including both prisons and jails across the country, with varying capacities, population sizes, and budgets. Most of the practices are also relatively low cost and straightforward to implement. The guide includes practices that facilities can implement from the time a parent enters the facility to the time immediately after they leave.

Family-friendly practices include activities such as welcoming visitor lobbies, parenting and relationship programming, contact visiting, coached telephone calls, family activity days, and family-inclusive reentry planning.

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The practices outlined provide guidance to correctional administrators on the types of changes that they could make within their facilities to remove barriers to parent-child communication and contact.

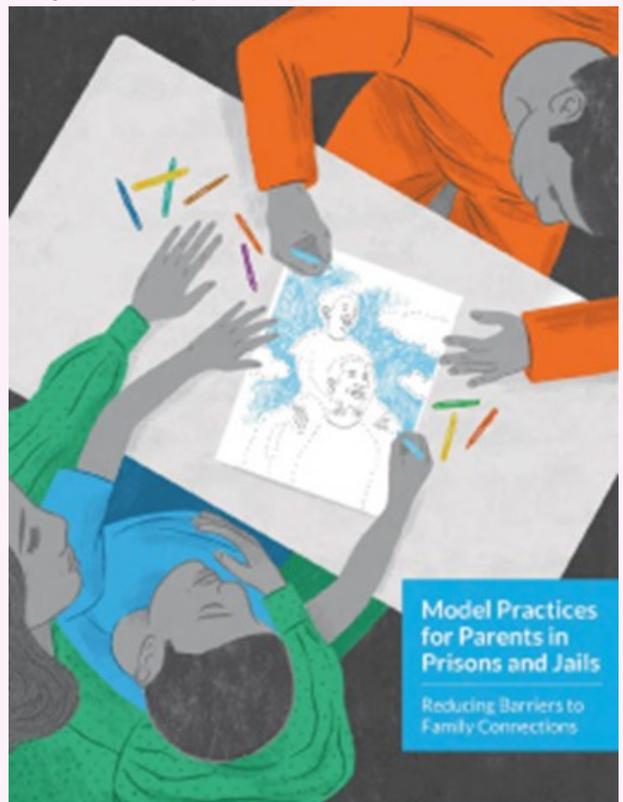
## Who Should Read This Guide?

This guide was created for people who can change and create policies and practices within a correctional system, such as individuals who make decisions about how to dedicate space and resources within a facility, individuals who make decisions about the agencies or organizations outside the correctional facility with which to partner and collaborate, and those who can design and manage policies and programs that reduce barriers to parent-child communication and contact. Therefore, this document targets correctional administrators (e.g., wardens, department of corrections directors or commissioners, sheriffs, and other officials) and organizations that work closely with correctional institutions or families of incarcerated parents. Though not our primary audience, this guide will also be of general interest to policymakers, professionals, and researchers interested in these issues.

## Content

Topics covered in the guide include:

- Partnership Building
- Training and Core Competencies
- Intake and Assessment
- Family Notification and Information Provision
- Classes and Groups
- Visitor Lobbies
- Visiting
- Parent-Child Communication
- Caregiver Support
- Family-Focused Reentry



For more information and to download the full publication, visit Urban Institute's website, [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org). If you have inquiries about the Model Practices guide, please contact Bryce Peterson at [BPeterson@urban.org](mailto:BPeterson@urban.org) or Lindsey Cramer at [LCramer@urban.org](mailto:LCramer@urban.org).

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## Editor's Message

When mass shootings occur, parents have to figure out how to talk to their children about violence. There's no one way to address tragedies with all children. It depends both on the child's age and temperament.

The American Psychiatric Association recommends avoiding the topic with very young children who would struggle to process it, but parents should talk to them about mass shootings if they are at risk of hearing it from others. The APA goes on to provide the following recommendations for talking about mass shootings with children of all ages:

- **Preschool-kindergarten: One-sentence story** – With young children, parents should keep the stories simple. These stories should be what the parents want the children to tell themselves.
- **Elementary school children: Shield them** – Parents need to decide on the takeaway message. If the children ask questions, the parents need to decide how much they want to share. Parents should prevent their children from seeing pictures or the news because the images will stick with children longer than words.
- **Tweens: Listen to their feelings** – Start the conversation by asking tweens if they heard about the latest shooting and listen to their feelings.
- **Teens: Look for solutions** – Again, parents should ask their teens if they have heard of the latest tragedy and allow them to share their feelings. But teenagers will expect more. They are looking for reasons and solutions. You can ask them, "What would you like to do? What can we do together?"

- Jerry

The Parenting Connection newsletter is a publication of the Wisconsin Chapter of the Correctional Education Association. The opinions herein are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the CEA-Wisconsin executive officers or the CEA-Wisconsin membership as a whole.

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