

Parenting Connection

Correctional Education Association—Wisconsin

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Dane County Jail Program Supports Parental Identity

In her article, “Reaching Out to Dads in Jail: Fathers and Children Do Better When Parental Identity Is Supported,” that appeared in the June 17, 2020 edition of the Madison, Wisconsin *Capital Times*, Abigail Becker wrote, “Incarceration disrupts the lives of both the parent and the child . . . A parent’s incarceration can have adverse academic and socio-emotional effects on children. And the inherent rules and infrastructure of jail visitation — limited contact, talking through plexiglass or via a video monitor, unwelcoming visitor areas — are obstacles to maintaining a warm relationship.”

She went on to observe, “Programs within the Dane County Jail, such as Parenting Inside Out and Literacy Link, seek to strengthen the parent-child bond by teaching parenting skills and promoting literacy activities. When relationships between incarcerated parents and their children are strong, research shows parents are less likely to reoffend, and substance abuse and criminal behavior declines. And children’s trauma symptoms are interrupted.”

Pajarita Charles, an assistant professor in the University of Wisconsin-Madison Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work has done research that focuses specifically on fathers, their involvement in the criminal justice system and their reentry into the community from prison and jail. Through her work, she has found that being a father can be a big part of a man’s identity, but that’s often ignored within the criminal justice system.

“We need and want to be connected. You’re a parent. Your role as a parent is a really big part of your identity,” Charles said. “In particular for fathers that are in the criminal justice system, typically as a society and as a justice system, we have not done a great job acknowledging their identity as a parent.”

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She concludes, “If you have a strong and pro-social and healthy and supportive network of people who can help you navigate that experience while you're incarcerated, and can be there with you and for you when you are released, you would expect, on average, hopefully, to do a little bit better than if you didn't have that.”

Parenting Inside Out

Parenting Inside Out is a parenting skills training program developed specifically for incarcerated parents. In February 2019, the Dane County Jail became one of five pilot sites across the nation selected to develop or modify the curriculum for a jail setting. As of March 2020, three groups of fathers had graduated from the program in the Dane County Jail.

Parenting Inside Out is the only parent-focused curriculum that has been tested through a peer-reviewed experimental study. The study, primarily funded through a National Institute of Mental Health grant awarded to the Oregon Social Learning Center, found that, compared to their peers, participants in the program were less likely to be rearrested, more likely to be involved in the lives of their children and less depressed. They also reported more family contact and less substance abuse.

In the Dane County Jail, program classes are held twice a week in two-hour installments. Facilitator Chelsea Jones typically enrolls 10 students drawn from a waiting list. To be eligible, participants have to be parents or caregivers and believe they will be in jail for the duration of the six-week program.

Jones said participants decide to go through the program to ensure they maintain a connection — or start one — with their kids while they are incarcerated. “This is a starting point for them,” Jones said.

The parenting program begins with basic communication and problem-solving skills. Every lesson includes emotion regulation — taking stock of their feelings and using breathing exercises to regulate. Part of the curriculum includes role playing. Participants practice how to play as a way of engaging and building connections with their kids.

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Enhanced Visits

University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, has done research that has shown that child-friendly contact visits are critical to maintaining relationships and potentially mitigating the adverse effects — including a fear-based relationship with parents, delayed developmental milestones and academic challenges — that often accompany having a parent in jail.

But jails are often not visitor-friendly. There is a long list of rules, and visitors are often separated from inmates by a plexiglass barrier. Scheduling a visit in a jail can be frustrating, and visiting hours are limited.

These hurdles led Poehlmann-Tynan and Charles to partner with the Dane County Jail to offer what they call “enhanced visits” through a UW-Madison project that combines coaching for the incarcerated parent and at-home caregiver with video visits.

Families are provided with a computer tablet to facilitate the virtual meeting. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these families are still able to stay in touch even though the jail has been closed to outside visitors. Poehlmann-Tynan said book reading is one of the most popular activities on the virtual calls, which is critical to promoting literacy.

“I see the most amazing things where the tablet has popped up and the incarcerated parent is supervising a little kid brushing their teeth, or they’re propped up during family dinner, chatting with their homework or the kids show their toys,” she said.

What’s Next

Those involved with implementing the Dane County Jail parenting program would also like to see a version of it available to former inmates who have recently left jail. Charles and Poehlmann-Tynan, along with the Madison-Area Urban Ministry and United Way of Dane County, applied for a U.S. Department of Justice grant to conduct a randomized controlled trial of the Parenting Inside Out curriculum with parents in the re-entry process after they have been released from prison or jail.

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“We’ve recognized the need for the services in the community and my big picture idea is that we develop a linked continuum of services for parents, whether it be in a prison, in a jail or in the community, so they’re getting the same thing in all those spaces,” Charles said.

She has received a National Institutes of Health grant to conduct a feasibility and acceptability study of a community-based program for fathers returning home from jail or prison. The pilot study will combine Parenting Inside Out with therapeutic peer support and extended family interactions. As soon as restrictions related to the coronavirus are lifted, Charles said the study will get underway.

Charles is also working to secure funding to conduct a study of the Parenting Inside Out program in the Dane County Jail. This study would add to a lack of research specific to parents serving time in jail, as opposed to prison.

The Literacy Link

Recognizing that children of incarcerated parents are at risk for greater social and emotional challenges, in addition to delays in communication skills, the University of Wisconsin-Extension created a program to promote literacy in young children with jailed parents. In Dane County, The Literacy Link was a founding partner in bringing Parenting Inside Out to the Jail and has also helped transform parent-child visits at the jail.

The Literacy Link coordinator Mary Huser, seeks to “build partnerships to shore up some of those skills early in life.” The program also seeks to create “language-rich” learning spaces at county jails and promote a critical life skill when children are present.

The Literacy Link program began in 2017 with \$200,000 from the UW-System as a pilot program in four Wisconsin county jails — Racine, Dane, Buffalo and Pepin — to engage children of incarcerated parents and their families in literacy activities. Since then, the program has expanded into Ashland, Bayfield, Dunn and Kenosha counties. [Click here to see their website](#)

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The program aims to improve reading, communicating and listening skills in addition to maintaining and building relationships between children and their incarcerated parent or caregiver. “Literacy is the tool that we’re using to build more of that parent-child connection, more of that at-home learning, more of that family positive interaction,” Huser said.

In Dane County, the program has facilitated changes to the visiting room. These include brighter wall paint, alphabet-centric wall hangings, conversation prompts on tables and a shelf stocked with books. The program repurposed an old vending machine to dispense books. Visiting children can receive a token from jail staff and pick out their own book to take home. [The Literacy Link](#) has provided parenting materials that share information and tips for communicating with young children (during visits and through letters and calls) for free access on jail tablets.

For More Information

Abigail Becker’s complete *Capital Times* article “Reaching Out to Dads in Jail: Fathers and Children Do Better When Parental Identity Is Supported” plus a podcast in which Abigail breaks down her story may be found [here](#).

If you have further questions about the program, the facilitators can be reached here. (Click their names to open an email!)

- [Pajarita Charles](#)
- [Mary Huser](#)
- [Chelsea Jones](#)
- [Julie Poehlmann-Tynan](#) (also check out Julie’s blog about kids with incarcerated parents [here!](#))

Tell Us About Your Program --- Email Your Article to: JerryBednarowski@new.rr.com

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Prisoner's Family Conference



The InterNational Prisoner's Family Conference is a grassroots organization initiated in 2009 to address critical issues of those affected by incarceration personally and/or professionally. Since its founding, an annual conference has been held each year. The 12th Annual conference is scheduled for October 22-24, 2020 in Dallas, Texas.

Like most conferences, this one features dynamic knowledgeable speakers and provides opportunities to learn best practice approaches and exchange creative ideas, but it is so much more. It offers such amazing opportunities to network and receive and provide encouragement and support that it has even been described as “magical!”

COVID-19 has interrupted all of our lives, including plans for the 2020 conference. The conference planners originally hoped for at least a “hybrid” conference, so those comfortable coming together at the Dallas venue could do so. But, the virus escalated again and sadly they were forced to face the writing on the wall. This year's conference will be virtual.

The conference goal is to strengthen the entire prison family and promote successful reentry and reunification, reducing the rate of recidivism by providing critical connections, information and resources for families and secular and faith-based organizations serving prisoners and their families.

2020 Virtual InterNational Prisoner's Family Conference presenters and registration information are now posted on their [website](#). Watch for updates as plans unfold.

The conference planners' greatest hope is to return to a live conference by October 2021! In fact, they've already scheduled the 2021 October conference with the Dallas hotel!

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The Benefits and Challenges of In-Home Video Chats

On July 14, 2020, Dr. Julie Poehlmann-Tynan posted a video on her [blog](#) that discusses the use of in-home video chats to connect young children with their incarcerated parents.

The new commentary in the *Journal of Children and Media* by Ph.D. student Elizabeth Skora Horgan and Professor Julie Poehlmann-Tynan lays out the importance of in-home video chat for young children with incarcerated parents. Especially during the novel coronavirus pandemic, when in-person visits to correctional facilities have been curtailed or eliminated, video chat offers a developmentally-appropriate alternative for young children and their incarcerated parents to connect. In-home video chat should not take the place of in-person contact visits, but they are a good alternative given today's restrictions.



How Witnessing Violence Impacts a Child's Life

Reports saying several children of Jacob Blake's were in the car at the time of his shooting in Kenosha, Wisconsin have highlighted concerns about the effect that witnessing violence against their parents has on children. It is traumatic. It is even traumatic for a child to see a parent or caregiver arrested.

In a Wisconsin Public Radio interview hosted Kealey Bultena, a licensed psychologist, Dr. Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, the Dorothy A. O'Brien Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, discusses how witnessing violence, especially involving parents, impacts a person. The Wisconsin Public Radio interview can be heard [here](#).

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The Safer Society Foundation Launches New Initiatives

Safer Society Foundation has two major initiatives to provide services and resources for preventive and restorative responses to sexual and social violence.

New Circle Mentoring

New Circle Mentoring helps Vermont at-risk children impacted by family member incarceration to overcome the unique obstacles in their paths to healthy adulthood. Children from homes shattered by parental absence often suffer emotional trauma that can adversely affect them the rest of their lives. New Circle Mentoring works to intercede with these at-risk children, matching them with the guidance and support of a caring adult.

Recently, the Safer Society Foundation has announced that they are expanding their successful mentoring program for Vermont children of incarcerated parents to include children who have been removed from their homes by social services and are being cycled in and out of foster care. For these at-risk children, whose lives are characterized by instability, fear, and turmoil, the New Circle Mentoring program provides the constancy of a five-year-long mentoring relationship, which can be a key factor in achieving their transition into healthy adulthood.

The Safer Society Press

The Safer Society Press publishes leading-edge, evidence-based books, directories and podcasts for the prevention of sexual and social violence.

The Safer Society Foundation is announcing its newest publication — an advertising-supported online quarterly magazine for professionals who work with at-risk children and adolescents: *The New Circle: Working with At-Risk Children*. The mission of the magazine is to form a circle of sharing and cross-pollination of practical knowledge with the wide array of professionals who work with at-risk children and adolescents.

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The magazine is being published for:

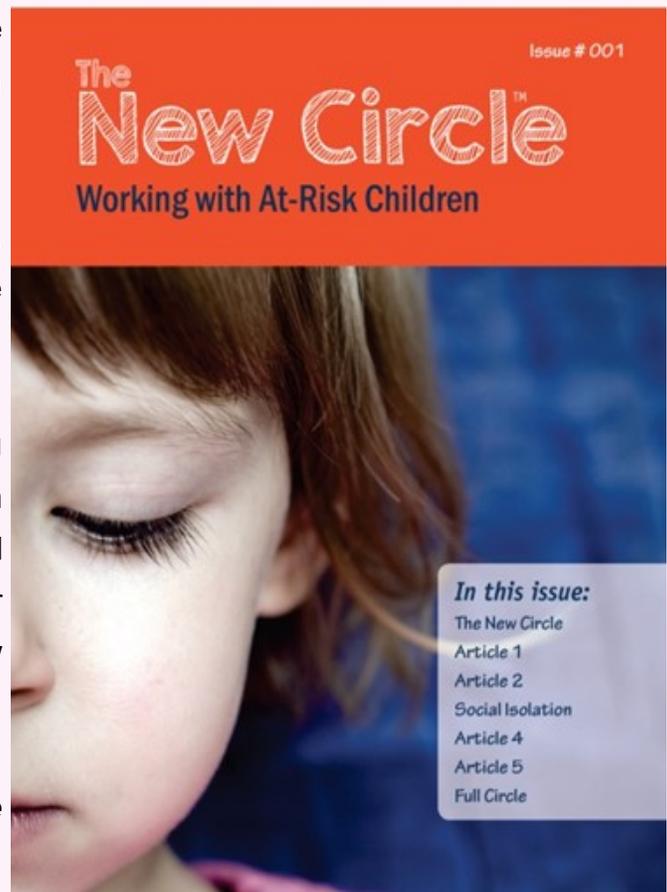
- social workers
- counselors and psychotherapists
- educators
- mentors
- foster care professionals
- early child care professionals
- pediatric professionals
- professionals in the field of juvenile justice and family law

Magazine articles will be written by professionals in their fields who wish to contribute to the circle of sharing and cross-pollination some aspect of the knowledge they've gained through their own experience working with this population.

Some articles will be solicited by the feature editors; unsolicited articles will be submitted to the feature editors for possible acceptance.

If you would like to submit an unsolicited article, you can begin by submitting a brief proposal, in the form of a tentative article title and 50–100-word description along with a summary of your professional credentials. The standard length of New Circle articles is under 1,000 words.

To find out about subscribing to *The New Circle* magazine or to submit an article, click [here](#).



Editor's Message

In addition to publishing this bi-monthly newsletter, CEA-Wisconsin publishes two handbooks – *Reaching Beyond Bars: A Handbook for Parents Incarcerated in Wisconsin and their Families* and *Prison Parenting Programs: Resources for Parenting Instructors in Prisons and Jails*.

The *Prison Parenting Programs* is published for those who wish to provide education and services for incarcerated parents and their families. It is continually being expanded. It now contains 145 entries on programs and resources for incarcerated parents and their families. This directory has been created to help correctional educators and community agencies enhance existing or create new parenting programs in correctional facilities and the community. *Prison Parenting Programs* is a "living document." This means information will continue to be added to the handbook as relevant programs and resources are identified. Revisions or updates to the listings in the directory are always welcome.

The handbooks are posted on the www.ceawisconsin.org, www.ceanational.org and www.fairshake.net websites. If you have information that you feel should be included in either of the handbooks, email jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com

Jerry

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Articles for publication in the Parenting Connection newsletter may be submitted to the Parenting Connection Newsletter Co-Editors: Jerry Bednarowski at jerrybednarowski@new.rr.com or Amanda Hillestad at Amanda.Hillestad@wisconsin.gov.

Co-Editor: Jerry Bednarowski, CEA-Wisconsin Board Member
Co-Editor: Amanda Hillestad, Jackson Correctional Institution