

# **Strengthening the father-child bond: using groups to improve the fatherhood skills of incarcerated fathers**

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**Abstract:** Incarceration of men causes many children to lose their fathers to imprisonment temporarily. Parenting programs often ignore or exclude incarcerated fathers. The involvement in criminal activities and the resulting incarceration does not exempt the fathers of their roles and responsibilities. The human element of rehabilitation and family relationships cannot be ignored. For many children of incarcerated parents, the best permanency plan is one in which the parent continues to play a significant role in the child's life. The preservation of families, even in a prison setting, is a priority.

The aim of this article is to describe the nature of a fatherhood-skills project with group work as the main method of intervention in a prison setting and the influence in alleviating the impact of incarceration on family members. The specific aim of the project was to strengthen family ties between incarcerated fathers and their children. Group work with the aim to improve fatherhood skills was done after a thorough situation analysis of inmates' needs. Fathers had to show motivation to be better fathers to be involved in the group work. The result of the project was an extended day visit for fathers and children and an ongoing effort in the specific prison to improve the skills of the fathers.

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## **Introduction**

Incarceration of men causes many children to lose their fathers to imprisonment temporarily. Stigma and demoralisation often accompanies family dismemberment caused by incarceration. Parent-child relationships during imprisonment are stressful at best (Hairston and Finney, 1998) and parenting programs often ignore or exclude incarcerated fathers (Bushfield, 2004). Fathers in prison are parents and have the same dreams and aspirations for their children as other men (Hairston and Finney, 1998). Involvement in criminal activities and the resulting incarceration does not exempt the fathers of their roles and responsibilities. There is however no clear role guideline for being a father while in prison.

Providing information to parents regarding resources and education about the effects of incarceration on families are important (Arditti Lambert-Shute and Joest, 2003). The parenting needs of inmates with respect to the varying roles they may fill in the lives of their children need attention (Bushfield, 2004). Adalist-Estrin (1995) mentions programs for inmates to practice parenting skills but emphasises that visits, support and discussion groups are necessary to help prepare the inmates for life outside of prison. An inmate's contact with family while still in prison may decrease recidivism rates and foster positive behaviour (Johnson, Selber and Lauerdale, 1998). Contacts include visits, correspondence and participation in programs. When inmates learn to repair and maintain their family relations they have lower recidivism rates and reduced disciplinary problems in the prison system (Bayse, Allgood and Van Wyk, 1991).

Corrections settings are an underused point of entry for human services delivery and family outreach. Although crime asks for justice and incarceration is an answer to punish criminal behaviour, correctional systems cannot ignore the human element of rehabilitation and family relationships. Cilliers and Smit (2007) emphasize the point of departure in the South African Department of Correctional

Services that rehabilitation of offenders through educational programmes, training programmes, social work sessions, psychological sessions and spiritual sessions is of the utmost importance. Better education is effective in lowering crime rates (Naudè, 2005), also through educational group work.

Incarceration challenges relationships between parents and children. For many children of incarcerated parents, the best permanency plan is one in which the parent continues to play a significant role in the child's life (Genty, 1998). The preservation of families, even in a prison setting, is a priority.

### **Fatherhood and incarceration**

Parenting programs and parent education teaches skills and provides information and resources for parents to enrich their lives and help their children develop (O'Neal and Reid, 1999). Empowering of parents adds to family functioning and strengthens social connectedness within families.

The aim of this article is to describe the nature of a fatherhood-skills project with group work as the main method of intervention in a prison setting and the influence in alleviating the impact of incarceration on family members. The research question for the study was: *how will a group work series with the aim of improving the fatherhood-skills of incarcerated fathers influence the father-child bond?* Third year students from the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, did the project. The specific aim of the project was and still is to strengthen family ties between incarcerated fathers and their children.

Literature emphasises and recommends parenting programs for incarcerated parents. The author used a program with the aim of improving the father-child relationship in Leicestershire at the Gartree Prison in Market Harborough and the Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service to inform the planning for the project (<http://www.leics.gov.uk/libraries/wigston/fathers.htm>).

'FATHERS' is a project that touches many of the major issues including social inclusion, crime and disorder, lifelong learning, literacy and numeracy, family learning and partnership. The project aimed to break the cycle of incarceration and low literacy and to help inmates become positive role models for their children. The project focused on the contribution that inmates could make to their children's development. To provide fathers with the opportunity to maintain contact with their children through reading they purchased a collection of paperback books for reading on tape. Inmates selected a book; read it on to tape and gave the book and tape to the child at visiting time. Soon after the project started, they used all the books in the initial collection and purchased more books and tapes.

### **The influence of parental incarceration on children**

The male prison population increases worldwide (Bushfield, 2004; Van Wyk, 2004; Clarke, O'Brien, Godwin, Hemmings, Day, Connolly and Leeson, 2005; Kriel, 2005). It is inevitable that the number of children in families with an incarcerated father also increases. Parental incarceration may lead to poor academic performance in children, emotional suffering, alcohol and drug abuse, involvement in crime themselves and family dissolution (Arditti et al., 2003; Bushfield, 2004). Incarceration changes the family system to a temporary, involuntary single-parent system. A parent's incarceration generates significant losses with regard to economic support and childcare.

The extent to which a parent's incarceration affects a child depends on the age of the child at the time of separation, the length of the separation, the support that the family receives, the nature of the parent's crime and the degree of stigmatisation that a specific community associates with incarceration (Seymour, 1998). Children of incarcerated parents may experience fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness and guilt. They may have low self-esteem, depression and

emotional withdrawal from significant others and may act out and have school-related difficulties (Seymour, 1998). Imprisonment of a parent influences the normal developmental stages and growth milestones, resulting in aggressive behaviour, learning difficulties, and maladaptive behaviour patterns including offending behaviour (Cunningham, 2001; Boswell, 2002).

Dealing with crimes through incarceration spreads the punishment to innocent parties such as the children (Johnson, Selber and Lauerdale, 1998). Children of incarcerated parents are at risk of out-of-home placement as well as intergenerational patterns of incarceration due to increased trauma, poverty and stigmatisation. The imprisonment of a parent often disrupts intact families with strong attachments between the child and the parent (Genty, 1998).

Prison visiting is demanding psychologically and physically for both children and adults. Visiting areas are often not ideal and do not always have facilities for children to play (Hairston and Finney, 1998). The areas may be crowded, noisy, dirty and overheated. This does not create the perfect atmosphere for improving parent-child relationships. Many children keep their parent's incarceration a secret and become quiet and reclusive. They may carry guilt in times when they do not want to visit the parent (Carlson and Cervera, 1992).

### **The influence of incarceration on being a father**

The context of the prison overwhelms responsible or active fathering because the fathers cannot be with their children and the incarceration undermines the possibility of responsible or active fathering upon re-entry into the family (Clarke, et al., 2005). Incarceration creates estrangement (Adalist-Estrin, 1995) and may even sometimes contribute to recidivism (Johnson et al., 1998).

Married fathers see their children more often (Hairston and Finney, 1998) but many incarcerated fathers do not receive visits from their children. This may be

due to the geographical location of prisons, the inability to afford transportation, the unwillingness of caregivers to facilitate visits, unfriendly visiting rooms for the children or parents' reluctance to have contact (Seymour, 1998). Fear of losing their children leads many prisoners to feel powerless, with a loss of parental authority and a sense of losing touch (Cunningham, 2001). Fathers' contact with their children during imprisonment depends largely on their ongoing relationship with the mother of their children (Hairston, 1998).

The values and norms of the specific prison setting will also have an influence on the identities of the fathers. An atmosphere of rehabilitation and willingness to grow from the experience can motivate and enhance responsible fathering. A 'rehabilitation and family preservation ethos' in a prison setting will contribute to higher motivation (Clarke et al., 2005).

Imprisoned fathers may feel that they are not good at being a father in comparison to fathering before imprisonment. Not contributing financially while in prison influences paternal identity and self-esteem. Prison pay is not enough to maintain and support a family (Hairston and Finney, 1998).

## **Stigma**

A stigma accompanies involvement in systems of criminal justice, which intensifies the potential of harm for families (Arditti et al., 2003). The stigma, shame and embarrassment make it even more difficult for children to cope with the absence of a father. Family members may distance themselves from the offender by not visiting or communicating (Carlson and Cervera, 1992). Incarceration is a loss experienced by families, but seldom elicits sympathy and support. Families often have to face the difficulties of the separation alone. Some families decide not to tell children that the father is in prison due to the associated stigma. Letters received in the mail and marked with a stamp from a

correctional facility can result in stigmatisation for the family (Hairston and Finney, 1998).

## **Process**

The aim of the project was to strengthen family ties between incarcerated offenders and their children by improving the fatherhood skills of the incarcerated fathers. The objectives were:

- To determine and analyse the needs of the target group by using a questionnaire focusing on social needs.
- To do an assessment to prioritise the needs.
- To have community representation to plan the intervention for addressing the prioritised needs.
- To conduct a group work series for improving the fathers' skills.
- To reinforce the fathers' efforts and attend to the needs of their children with an extended visit in a father-child day.
- To evaluate the influence of the intervention and make conclusions and recommendations to service providers working with incarcerated fathers and their children.

## **Target group**

According to the Annual report of the Department of Correctional Services of South Africa (2004/2005) the mission of the department is to place rehabilitation at the centre of all departmental activities and to focus on the correction of offending behaviour, the promotion of social responsibility and the overall development of the person under correction. Social workers in the South African Department of Correctional services conducted 77858 group work sessions countrywide in the 2004/05 financial year. In 2003 to 2004, the ratio for social work was one professional to 595 cases. Kriel (2005) emphasises that the daily inmate population in South Africa increased by 348 per cent from 1956 to 2004.

South African prisons are seriously overcrowded (Cilliers and Smit, 2007). According to the Annual report of the Department of Correctional Services of South Africa (2006/2007) the target set for social work services and programmes registered a decrease in performance. Management in the specific correctional setting thus welcome the involvement of tertiary institutions.

The setting for the project is a medium security facility. The respondents, all fathers, was purposively selected from Sections A and B. Inmates in Sections A and B had progressed in their rehabilitation process, showed good behaviour and had more privileges. Management was open to provide needs based services aiming at facilitating social links with families and granted permission to do the project.

Of the forty nine (49) respondents fifty per cent (50%) were Afrikaans, nine per cent (9%) were English, twenty per cent (20%) were Zulu, three per cent (3%) were Tsonga, three per cent (3%) were Venda, five per cent (5%) were South Sotho and ten per cent (10%) were Northern Sotho. Thirty nine per cent (39%) had schooling up to grade 12, twenty four per cent (24%) had schooling up to grade 11, and eight per cent (8%) had schooling up to grade 7. The respondents had eighty-two (82) children altogether, ranging from infants to nineteen (19) years and older.

### **The group leaders**

Brown and Caddick (1993) emphasise the merits of group work with offenders. Group work offers offenders opportunities to reflect on actions and to rehearse new behaviours. Peer influence plays a significant role as offenders more likely disclose information if others recognise the information in similar circumstances (Dixon, 2000). The value and merit of group work underpinned the planning.

Social work students in the Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria have compulsory modules in intervention with groups. Seven (7) third year undergraduate social work students were involved in the project. One of the requirements for third year practical training is to present a group work series of a minimum of ten (10) sessions and to plan and implement a community work project. The student group consisted of one male student and six (6) female students. The group was culturally diverse with two (2) white students and five (5) black students. Lecturers specifically selected these students from the larger group due to the intensity of working in a prison setting. The Department of Social Work and Criminology at the University of Pretoria teaches social work students to be sensitive to diversity. No cultural or racial issues were encountered.

### **Determining the needs**

Although the social workers and psychologists had knowledge of the problems of the inmates, the only way to know the needs experienced by community members is to move into the community and assess the situation (Lombard, Weyers and Schoeman, 1991). People have the right to participate in decision-making as beneficiaries of an initiative to help them (Ascroft and Hristodoulakis, 1999). If people have the opportunity to understand and express themselves, they will be able to critically reflect and offer solutions (Kiiti and Nielsen, 1999). Trevithick (2005) emphasises that group programmes run in prisons are less effective and helpful when the primary purpose is to meet targets. One can overlook the needs of individual members in trying to meet targets.

The students and the service providers compiled a questionnaire focusing on social needs. They piloted the questionnaire with two prisoners to ensure that the content was clear. The analysis of the data indicated that strengthening the relationships with family members, especially with spouses and children, was a priority. The inmates verbalised the need for more contact with and the

opportunity to work on the relationships with family members outside prison. Ashe (1993) identified similar needs in a project. The needs profile in this case also revealed that inmates are concerned about the effects their imprisonment will have on their relationships with partners and children.

Incarcerated fathers often lose contact with their children due to divorce during the period of incarceration or mothers who deliberately cease contact. Changes in marital status and family make-up are rather common (Hairston, 1998; Hairston and Finney, 1998; Cunningham, 2001). This results in feelings of anger and depression and many inmates losing hope. Group work can assist in reducing feelings of isolation (Dixon, 2000). The needs assessment indicated that demands for contact did not always have a positive outcome and that not all the fathers in prison knew about their rights as fathers.

## **Representation**

Intervention with communities asks for participation from all involved. Communities have to play an active role in planning a project (Lombard et al., 1991; Weyers, 2001). Representation from community members is necessary to ensure full participation and ownership.

The effectiveness of a community's social functioning is determined by the way in which each community member takes responsibility for their own as well as the development of other community members. They are in the best position to identify and eliminate their own impediments, but need assistance. The recommended level for intervention is the grass roots level and goals are to empower, to develop self-help, leadership, problem solving; to create self-supporting, problem solving groups or structures; to promote unity in the community; and to develop a future orientated vision. Typical intervention objectives are attitudinal, emotional and behavioural change. Community members are participants in an empowerment process in small task groups

(Weyers, 2001). The social workers from the Department of Correctional Services, the students, their lecturer and fathers wanting to improve their relationships with their children, formed a task group. The task group was culturally representative and considered cultural needs in planning the programme.

### **First activity: session on legal rights of fathers**

Due to the large numbers of inmates in this prison, it was necessary to narrow the population down. Fathers who showed positive behaviour and who were on their way to rehabilitation, namely A-group inmates, were invited for the first session. The fathers paid a small amount each to help with the refreshments for the day and to show their commitment to the project.

The project commenced with an information session on legislation on the rights of fathers. The Commissioner of Child Care (Pretoria) gave information on the rights of fathers emphasising the way to initiate the process of making contact with their children. An evaluation form was filled in after the session. Evaluation of educational group sessions is important (Sands and Solomon, 2003). Feedback was positive and all the fathers indicated that they would like to participate in the fatherhood skills project.

### **Second activity: group work series**

Screening interviews were based on an assessment of members' needs to ensure that their needs matched with the purposes of the group (Jacobs, Masson and Harvill, 2002; Sands and Solomon, 2003; Toseland and Rivas, 2005). Some of the fathers had an unrealistic expectation that the group will ensure contact with their children. The aim of the group was however not to get the children to the fathers but to get the fathers to the children. Brown and Caddick (1993)

emphasise the fact that offenders are more likely to respond positively if treated as responsible for their own actions.

Interested members had to contract that they understand the aim of the proposed groups. They compiled seven groups with seven members (inmates/fathers) each as the ideal number for an intensive group. Ashe (1993) also limited the group size for the families group to eight group members to ensure good mutual support and trust. The groups would run as treatment groups in the form of educational and growth groups with the aim of developing potential (Toseland and Rivas, 2005). The membership would remain constant once the group has begun to ensure the best growth (Jacobs et al., 2002). The sessions built upon each other and it was important to build cohesion and intimacy (Sands and Solomon, 2003).

Zastrow (2001) mentions the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group and interpersonal learning as aims of group treatment. The aim of the group work was to improve the skills of the fathers. They had to work on their own skills in order to make contact with the children and build relationships. Groups offer members a place where they can learn new knowledge and practice new behaviours and skills (Garrett, 2004). The group members were aware of the fact that they had rights as fathers, but that they could not expect their spouses and children to keep up the relationships. In contracting with group members, it was clarified that the fathers had the responsibility to create and maintain the relationships with their children as the children were the innocent victims.

The group leaders held a minimum of ten group sessions with each of the seven groups with in-depth sessions of 90 to 120 minutes per week. The following aspects received attention by involving all group members in setting the goals and selecting the topics:

- Communication with my child and my role and responsibilities as a father.

Letters and telephone calls are attempts to normalise family interaction in an abnormal environment (Clarke et al., 2005). Group members were encouraged to write letters and send cards regardless of receiving any. External sponsorships enabled the group leaders to supply the fathers with paper of different colours, pens, glue and envelopes. They received guidance in making interesting and colourful cards. The final products enhanced their self-images as fathers. These letters and cards showed their commitment to the child, even if at a distance. Garrett (2004) emphasises that group work activities foster creativity, build competence and confidence and improve decision-making. The mutual aid in the groups encouraged the group members to engage in making cards and writing letters outside the group setting as well.

- Communication with the mother of my child.

Many of the group members expressed concern about their relationship with the mother of their children. Some mentioned that the mothers do not want to bring the children to prison, do not allow telephone calls and some even had the experience that the mothers filed for divorce. This topic focused on communication with the mother with regard to the children. The communication has to be civilised and open regardless of feelings of hatred, frustration and hurt due to experiences. Clarke et al. (2005) emphasise the importance of the imprisoned father's relationship with the mother of his children. The mother plays a central interface-moderating role, since she accompanies the children on visits to prison. Her influence is crucial in facilitating letter writing or telephone calls.

- Developmental stages of children.

Incarcerated fathers are not permanently involved with their children and this often results in a lack of knowledge about the developmental stages of the children. Knowing the nature of each stage can enable a parent to know how to approach, communicate with and what to expect of the child (Santrock, 2006). Positive reinforcement, predictability, instilling values and a sense of responsibility and discipline are aspects to consider in an attempt to be an

effective parent (Williams, Sawyer and Wahlstrom, 2006). These aspects are contingent upon the developmental stage of the child.

- My self-image as a father.

Prison can offer a time of personal reflection (Clarke et al., 2005). Prisoners can be reflective of their roles as fathers while in prison (Bushfield, 2004). The group members all wanted to correct their mistakes and 'make up' for the suffering that they caused their families. The group leaders facilitated a process of positive thinking. The fathers were encouraged to focus on the positive aspects of their fathering role and to do more of those aspects that had a positive influence on the relationship with their children and ultimately on their self-image and self-motivation to be a better father.

- Influence of family of origin on fatherhood and parenting styles.

Both positive and negative parenting practices may be transmitted across generations (Chipman, Olsen, Klein, Hart and Robinson, 2000; Benokraitis, 2005). A group session was devoted to discussing the three major parenting styles, namely authoritarian, authoritative and permissive (Williams et al., 2006). In discussing their childhood group members gained insight in their own parenting styles. They identified similarities and were able to distinguish between the positive as well as the negative impact of specific styles. Inmates often report more authoritarian parenting (Chipman et al., 2000). Received parenting is often a model of how to parent resulting in people falling victim to a cycle of less optimal parenting simply because they do not have knowledge of alternatives.

The participation and motivation of group members were commendable. Principles and techniques from Behaviourism, specifically positive reinforcement were utilised throughout the intervention process (Zastrow, 2001; Corey and Corey, 2002). The group members were aware that it was their responsibility to improve the relationship with their children. Members gave feedback and

encouragement to each other, which led to the desired changes in thoughts and in behaviour concerning their roles as fathers. Mutual aid is emphasised in group interventions (Pinto and Queely, 2003). The opportunity to share, give, and receive support enriched the group experience (McVinney and Hamid, 2002). The stigma and rejection associated with certain client groups such as incarcerated fathers, made the group experience a mechanism to promote self worth.

### **Third activity: reinforcing the efforts**

They formed a second task group with a representative from each one of the seven groups, the students, their lecturer and the social workers and again assessed the needs in terms of the way forward. The needs of the target group at that moment as well as the potential had to be determined (Potgieter, 1998).

The representative committee made a unanimous decision from the feedback that a 'Father-child-day' would be organised to show their children and family that they were eager to be better fathers. Visits by family members are an important time for direct emotional support and communication (Seymour, 1998; Clarke et al., 2005). The project leader wrote a memorandum motivating the project to the head of the prison and he granted permission to have the father-child day. The children and the person responsible for transporting the child to prison were invited.

The concept of the FATHERS Project was taken to the involved fathers. With the help of donors who sponsored audiotapes and stationary, the fathers read stories, recorded music and 'talked' to the children on tape. The participants also made photo frames and cards and wrapped them as surprises for the children. Students from the Department of Human Movement Studies, University of Pretoria, took the responsibility of organising fun activities for the day. Tug of war, eating apples with no hands and sack races were some of the organised

activities. Fathers and children had the opportunity to compete with each other as well as with other father-child teams. Background music created a relaxed and fun atmosphere. They had a barbeque and the children received the surprise at the end of the program.

The children and the people who accompanied them left first and the fathers stayed behind as a group. The fathers cleaned the venue and then appointed one of the fathers to thank the students. The students and staff members acknowledged the fathers for their hard work, motivation and perseverance in improving their skills as fathers and their effort in strengthening family bonds.

## **Evaluation**

All the participants completed evaluation forms since evaluation forms an integral part of any project (Potgieter, 1998; Corey and Corey, 2002; Toseland and Rivas, 2005). Feedback and comments included the following: 'I feel nearer to my kids – best in 2 years', 'Children really enjoyed the day', 'It helped me to strengthen the bond with my child', 'Enjoyed it to do stuff together', 'By being in closer social contact we could be ourselves', 'I had an interesting face-to-face contact with the children, which was unforgettable. We shared activities that promoted our relationship', 'The amount of time really improves relationships', 'The ability to interact and spend adequate time has made father-child relationship boost to higher levels' and 'She didn't even want to leave. She wanted to spend a night here'.

The positive feedback from the inmates highlighted not only their need for contact with their children and an opportunity to strengthen family bonds, but also their willingness to right some of the wrong. The prison authorities took note of the positive outcome and although they focus on punishment and rehabilitation, realised the necessity for projects to help the family members deal with the situation of a father's incarceration. The result of the project was that the other

inmates, who were not part of the specific project, formed self-help groups with the fathers from the first group work series as leaders. The project continues with the same aims and objectives.

## **Conclusion**

Prison support services to help incarcerated fathers preserve and strengthen positive relationships with relatives are not the norm. The recommendation is that social workers launch similar projects to alleviate the impact of imprisonment on the children of inmates in the light of the successes of the Fatherhood skills project. Programs that work should be replicated (Adalist-Estrin, 1995). Programs in prison should focus on an educational parenting curriculum and transition programs that can improve parenting skills (Bushfield, 2004). Research in the field of parent education programs in prison settings is necessary to understand what will really change and improve parenting (Chipman et al., 2000). The involvement of schools for social work and universities should indicate to social service agencies and the community the importance of intervention with offenders and their families (Johnson et al., 1998).

The findings from this study of a group work program to improve fatherhood skills of incarcerated fathers contribute to the improved focus on rehabilitation and family preservation in prison settings. The results of the project indicate that incarcerated fathers open to rehabilitation and behavioural change can be involved in groups focusing on being a parent and improving skills. Research directions including in-depth exploration of children's perceptions and experiences of having an incarcerated father are suggested. The long-term influence of incarcerated fathers involved in an attempt to improve their fatherhood skills and the influence on the father-child bond need exploring.

Crime asks for justice and society enforces the idea. The needs of the hidden victims, in this case the children of incarcerated fathers must not be overlooked. Since family ties are instrumental in reducing the stress experienced by individuals separated from their loved ones, in promoting the prisoner's mental health and in maintaining family bonds, it might even decrease recidivism. The number of children in families with incarcerated fathers increases. The need for improved parenting in prisons cannot be overstated. The author agrees with Hairston and Finney (1998) that fathers in prison are parents too. Moreover, that the children of incarcerated fathers need their fathers in their lives.

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