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“WHAT WORKS” IN PROGRAMS SERVING FATHERS INVOLVED IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM? LESSONS FROM EVIDENCE-BASED EVALUATIONS

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Background

“What works” in programs serving incarcerated fathers and fathers involved in the criminal justice system? Between 1991 and 1999, the percentage of children with an incarcerated father increased by 58 percent, and it was estimated that 721,500 state and federal prisoners, 93 percent of whom were male, had fathered at least one child under the age of 18.ⁱ When a father is incarcerated, there are repercussions not only for himself, but also for his spouse or partner, and most importantly for his children.^{ii,iii} With rising rates of incarceration, there has been an increased interest in developing programs that specifically address the needs of fathers in the criminal justice system. While expectations for programs to promote responsible fatherhood among fathers involved in the criminal justice system are high, information about which programs and practices are most effective is limited.

Only rigorous evaluations of programs can provide evidence of whether or not programs have the desired effects. Fortunately, the existence of several rigorous evaluations of recent programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system allow us to make preliminary conclusions about those features that make for effective fatherhood programs. This brief identifies eight common features of “model” programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system using principles derived from rigorous evaluation research.

Criteria for Rating Effective Programs Serving Fathers Involved in the Criminal Justice System

Only rigorous evaluations of programs can provide evidence of whether or not programs actually have a desired effect. The evidence base on the effects of programs on outcomes for fathers involved in the criminal justice system varies widely, as does the quality and rigor of research methods. Results from well-designed programs that have been rigorously evaluated should be taken more seriously than results from less well-designed and evaluated programs. Several principles of rigorous research often yield high quality results making for effective programs. *Of the 20 programs considered in this review, only four programs met these criteria.*

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“Model” programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system are defined as those that:

- Had been experimentally evaluated (randomized controlled trial study);
- Had been evaluated by an independent, external evaluator with publicly available evaluation results;
- Had a sample size for evaluation that exceeded 30 in both the treatment and control group;
- Retained at least 60% of the original sample for the evaluation;
- Had at least one outcome that was positively changed by 10% and;
- Had at least one outcome with a substantial effect size that was statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

“Model” programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system fulfilling these criteria were:

- Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Program (New York);
- Filial Therapy Training with Incarcerated Fathers (New York);
- Parental Training for Incarcerated Fathers (Oklahoma); and
- Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) for Incarcerated Fathers (Across the US).

Eight Characteristics of “Model” Programs

The four “model” programs for fathers in the criminal justice system that were identified shared eight common features. These features reflect different aspects of teaching and the particular content of programs. There is no evidence to suggest which combination of these characteristics contributes to the overall success of these programs, nor is there evidence that each program had each of these characteristics. “Model” programs:

1. Provided staff training or hired staff with experience working with incarcerated populations.
2. Used theoretically driven program models.
3. Allowed a sufficient time to complete important core activities adequately (at least 8 weeks).
4. Taught both incarcerated and re-entering fathers important skills and gave them opportunities to practice using them.
5. Provided incentives to engage fathers and families.
6. Engaged fathers either one-on-one or in small group settings.
7. Addressed the unique needs of both incarcerated and re-entering fathers.
8. Provided diversity in the delivery of program services to incarcerated fathers.

#1. “Model” programs provided staff training or hired staff with experience working with incarcerated populations.

Fathers involved with the criminal justice systems are a high-risk group with unique challenges and needs. Model programs either provided staff training or hired staff that had experience working with incarcerated fathers. Job coaches working at the *Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Program* were trained vocational specialists. The facilitators for *Parental Training for Incarcerated Parents* were certified parent training instructors. The facilitators for the *STEP* program parenting classes had prior experience teaching parenting classes in a prison setting.

#2. “Model” programs for incarcerated fathers used theoretically-driven program models.

Although few programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system have been replicated, most model programs used theoretical perspectives or theories of change and approaches that had been found to be effective in work with fathers. The curriculum used in *STEP for Incarcerated Fathers* was a modified version of the original *STEP* program, which was intended to increase parent satisfaction, parent levels of confidence, and knowledge of parenting and child development.^{iv} *Parental Training for Incarcerated Parents* used lessons from the original *STEP* program as well as lessons from *Concept Media’s Curriculum*^{v,vi}, designed to increase fathers’ knowledge of child developmental stages, and *The Nurturing Program*, designed to teach fathers about behavior-management techniques^{vii}

#3. “Model” programs for both incarcerated and re-entering fathers lasted a sufficient amount of time to complete important core activities adequately (at least 8 weeks).

Model programs ranged in duration from eight sessions delivered over several weeks (e.g., in *STEP for Incarcerated Fathers*) to several months of program activities (e.g., the *CEO* program). Fathers participating in the *CEO* program completed four days of training followed by four-day work weeks with one day reserved for job coaching until permanently placed. Once permanently placed in a job, job coaches continued to track participants to encourage job retention. In all model programs, programming was held at least once a week for at least one-and-a-half hours.

#4. “Model” programs taught both incarcerated and re-entering fathers important skills and gave them opportunities to practice using them.

Effective programs went beyond classroom instruction. Fathers participating in effective programming were given opportunities to solidify their newly learned skills through hands-on application. Fathers participating in *Filial Therapy Training* program attended both weekly training sessions and weekly supervised play sessions with one of their children, during which they practiced their new parenting skills. Fathers in the *CEO* program participated in pre-employment classes as well as paid transitional employment and job coaching. They were also provided with ongoing post-placement support after finding a permanent placement.

#5. “Model” programs working with re-entering fathers used an incentive with fathers.

Although incentives were not a common component of all “model” programs working with incarcerated fathers, they were important in the *CEO* program, an employment program for ex-offenders. Fathers were motivated to participate because they were assigned to a work crew at minimum wage after only four days of training. Additionally, after being permanently placed in a job, participants received incentives to remain employed at 30-day milestones.

#6. “Model” programs worked with incarcerated and re-entering fathers either one-on-one or in small group settings.

“Model” programs had a higher staff-participant ratio and/or provided opportunities for participating fathers to work one-on-one with staff. Group size ranged from eight participants (*Filial Therapy Training*) to 21 participants (*STEP for Incarcerated Fathers*). Smaller groups helped fathers to feel more comfortable and allowed them to participate more fully in discussions and activities. Fathers participating in the *CEO* program worked one-on-one with a vocational specialist who assisted them in preparing for and finding an appropriate permanent placement. Working one-on-one with participants gave job coaches the opportunity to get to know participants, assess the type of job they were interested in, deem when they were ready, and find them an appropriate placement.

#7. “Model” programs addressed the unique needs facing both incarcerated and re-entering fathers.

Fathers involved in the criminal justice system are more likely than other fathers to have used drugs. Additionally, they are less likely than incarcerated mothers to have contact with their children, and their low levels of educational attainment and lack of employable skills can make it difficult for them to find work upon reentry. Model programs found to be

effective addressed the unique needs of incarcerated fathers. For example, communication strategies taught in the original *STEP* program were redesigned to focus on letters, telephone calls, and visiting hours, so that they would be applicable for incarcerated fathers. As part of their sessions, fathers in this program also received counseling about socialization and reentry into the family unit. Fathers in the *CEO* program were taught how to answer questions about their convictions while on interviews for permanent placement.

#8. Effective programs provided diversity in the delivery of program services to incarcerated fathers.

Few effective programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system relied on a traditional lecture-style presentation of materials. Effective programs delivered program services in a variety of engaging and interactive ways. Fathers in *STEP for Incarcerated Fathers* participated in small group discussion as well as letter-writing and role-plays. Time was set aside at the end of each session for participants to make something (e.g., a picture or a story) for their children. *Parental Training for Incarcerated Parents* used audiovisual material to make sessions more interesting, while *Filial Therapy Training* used both small group discussion and role-play during weekly training sessions.

Conclusion

Because the responsible fatherhood movement is relatively new, evaluation research on programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system is still limited and only a handful of experimentally evaluated programs currently exist. For this review, to derive a subset of “model” programs for fathers involved in the criminal justice system, 20 programs were reviewed and only four fit the criteria as “model” programs, i.e., had been experimentally evaluated. Lessons learned are based on these four programs. It is important to note that the features of the “model” programs presented above are suggestions based upon existing research. We cannot say which combinations of these features will work in programs serving fathers involved in the criminal justice system. For detailed descriptions of all 20 programs considered, as well as those four programs that have been shown to be “model” programs, a more detailed report is available at www.fatherhood.gov.

DESCRIPTIONS OF “MODEL” PROGRAMS

- (1) **Center for Employment Opportunities** worked with ex-offenders in New York City. The program offered ex-prisoners job-readiness training and counseling then placed ex-offenders in paid temporary employment and assisted their search for permanent employment. In a randomly assigned experimental evaluation of the program ex-offenders participating in the CEO program were more likely to be employed and to stay employed than their non-participating peers. They were also less likely to be convicted of new crimes.

Sources:

Bloom, D., Redcross, C., Zwieg, J., & Azurdia, G. (2007). Transitional jobs for ex-prisoners: Early Impacts from a random assignment evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities Prisoner Reentry Program (Working paper). New York, NY: MDRC.

The Center for Employment Opportunities & MDRC. (2006). The power of work: Center for employment opportunities comprehensive prisoner reentry program.

Website: www.ceoworks.org

- (2) **Filial Therapy Training with Incarcerated Fathers** worked with fathers who were incarcerated at a medium security federal correctional prison, and aimed to teach fathers to be responsive listeners, to be cognizant of their children’s emotional needs and help them build their children’s self esteem. During the ten-week program fathers received didactic instruction, participated in structured play sessions and received support and encouragement from the investigator and peers in group supervision sessions. In a randomly assigned experimental evaluation of the program incarcerated fathers who participated in the program scored significantly higher than fathers in the control group on all measures of child acceptance and significantly lower on measures of parental stress than fathers who did not participate in the program.

Sources:

Landreth, G.L., & Lobaugh, A.F. (1998) Filial therapy with incarcerated fathers: Effects on parental acceptance of child, parental stress, and child adjustment. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 76(2), 157-165;

Watts, R.E., & Broaddus, J.J. (2002). Improving parent-child relationships through filial therapy: An interview with Gary Landreth. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 80, 372-379.

- (3) **Parental Training for Incarcerated Fathers** worked with incarcerated fathers at a correctional facility in Oklahoma to improve fathers’ attitudes about child-rearing and increase fathers’ self-esteem and children’s positive self-concept over the course of a six-week program. In a randomly assigned experimental evaluation of the program, incarcerated fathers who completed the program showed significant positive changes regarding parental attitudes compared to fathers who did not complete the program.

Source:

Harrison, K. (1997). Parental training for incarcerated fathers: Effects on attitudes, self-esteem, and children’s self-perceptions. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 137(5), 588-593.

- (4) **Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) for Incarcerated Fathers** worked with incarcerated fathers at a medium security level correctional facility to increase fathers’ knowledge of parenting and child development as well as satisfaction and confidence with parenting. The program consisted of eight class sessions on parenting over a three week period. The parenting class was aimed at increasing knowledge of parenting and child development, parent satisfaction and parent’s levels of confidence. In a randomly assigned experimental evaluation of the program, incarcerated fathers who participated in the program were found to have significantly greater knowledge about parenting, increased levels of satisfaction and confidence about their role as parents than men who did not participate in the program.

Sources:

Dinkmeyer, K., & McKay, G.D. (1982). *The parents handbook: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services;

Wilczak, G.L., & Markstrom, C.A. (1999). The effects of parent education on parental locus of control and satisfaction of incarcerated fathers. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 43, 90.

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- ^{iv} Dinkmeyer, K. & McKay, G. D. (1982). *The Parents Handbook: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Services.
- ^v Smith, L. (1973). *Human development: The first two and one-half years*. Costa Mesa, CA: Concept Media
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- ^{vii} Bavolek, S. J. & Comstock, C. (1985). *The nurturing program*. Eau Claire, WI: Family Development Resources.
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