

Issues and Recommendations Related to Children's Visitation and Contact with Incarcerated Parents

Because of the high incarceration rates in the United States (U.S.), millions of U.S. children have a parent incarcerated in correctional facilities each year (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008; Kemper & Rivara, 1993). With the exception of a handful of prison nurseries (Byrne, Goshin, & Joestl, 2010), infants and children of all ages live in the community apart from their jailed or imprisoned parents, sometimes at a significant geographical distance. Thus, contact (especially visitation) between children and their incarcerated parents is an important issue for an increasing number of U.S. children and families (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010).

The following 5 recommendations concern children's experience of visitation and other forms of contact with their incarcerated parent. We recommend improvements and changes that may help make visitation and contact more child- and family- friendly. Child- and family- friendly visitation procedures would involve preparing children for visits, allowing for open communication during face-to-face visitation, promoting parent-child contact (e.g., letters, telephone calls, video-based or digital exchanges) between visits, and supporting incarcerated parents throughout the process.

Recommendation #1. Improve Visit Preparation for Children, Caregivers, and Incarcerated Parents

Even before a child visits a parent in correctional facility, there are several things that children's caregivers and incarcerated parents can do to help prepare children, and themselves, for the visitation experience. Such preparations can help reduce stress and make the visit more successful. First, children's caregivers should be provided with information about the correctional facility's policies and procedures. For instance, caregivers will need information about dress code procedures, the type of proper identification needed, what they are allowed to bring in with them (e.g., diapers, bottles), and how many children can accompany them on the visit. In many instances, a caregiver may arrive with children at a correctional facility expecting to be able to visit their loved one, only to be turned away because they are not dressed appropriately, not on an approved visit list, or did not have proper identification for themselves or the children. Being turned away after making the journey to visit a loved one at a correctional facility is extremely frustrating and may contribute to negative feelings toward future visits (Christian, 2005).

To prepare a child for a visit at a correctional facility, one should talk to the child about the upcoming visit in a developmentally-appropriate manner, including discussion of details

about each step of the visit (including any security procedures); what she might see and hear; institutional rules that are necessary to follow (e.g., what physical contact is allowed, such as hugs rather than sitting on the parent's lap); and discussion of potential emotional reactions that might occur at each step of the visit, including saying good-bye. Ideally, this information should be presented in a supportive manner that is sensitive to the child's age, gender, cognitive level, and temperament. The adult should answer the child's questions honestly and simply, as distorted communication about the parent's incarceration has been linked to feelings of attachment insecurity in young children of incarcerated mothers (Poehlmann, 2005).

Some institutions are making great strides in programming efforts that help prepare parents and children for what they may experience during the visitation. For example, the Family Activity Center in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County Jail provides a child-centered environment that allows children the opportunity to explore and practice visits through child-sized Plexiglas models before they visit parents

(http://foundationcenter.org/grantmaker/childguidance/i_fac.html). Correctional facility parent education programs may help prepare parents for the emotions they and their children may experience during visitation and help them develop strategies for managing those emotions (e.g., see description of the Linkages Program below).

Recommendation #2. Improve the Quality of Visitation Experiences

Correctional policies regarding visitation and institutional environments, which vary greatly across U.S. states and institutional settings, represent important considerations that affect the quality of parent-child visitation during parental incarceration. Incarcerated parents and children's caregivers have reported a need for improved corrections policies, procedures, and settings for visitation (Arditti, 2003; Kazura, 2001), including the provision of child-friendly settings that have age-appropriate games and toys for children and their incarcerated parents. Positive settings for visitation are important for children's adjustment during parental incarceration (Poehlmann et al., 2010).

Child-friendly visits ideally provide safe, positive environments for visits and promote open communication among incarcerated parents, children, and caregivers. A number of programs throughout the U.S. provide such opportunities (e.g., Girl Scouts Beyond Bars; Block & Potthast, 1998), thus helping children and their parents and caregivers to understand the context in which visitation occurs and to prepare themselves for the sometimes intense emotional

aspects of visitation. For example, in Virginia, the Linkages Program (see Grayson, 2007) gives families a monthly opportunity to visit an incarcerated parent face-to-face in a friendly environment, rather than visiting through a Plexiglas barrier. The incarcerated parent participants in this program also attend weekly parent education classes that address the needs of children and parents. In other institutions children are allowed to visits with mothers for six-hours at a time in a homelike cottage, while their mothers participate in on-going parent education programs (e.g., Harris, 2006).

Quality of prison and jail visitation also has implications for corrections facilities and relevant policies. Some have emphasized the importance of family visitation as a way to improve the institutional behavior of incarcerated individuals and reduce recidivism (e.g., Laughlin, Arrigo, Blevins, & Coston, 2008), and several U.S. states have passed legislation mandating correctional facility attention to family visitation as one way to improve corrections safety and reduce recidivism rates (Laughlin et al., 2008). However, visitation with children may not yield as many benefits for incarcerated individuals (e.g., Bales & Mears, 2008) if the experience is marked by intense emotional distress. If visitation environments (e.g., face-to-face contact, child-friendly setting), policies, and processes (e.g., preparation, follow-up), and overall quality were improved, it is possible that the theorized positive link between parent-child visitation and better incarcerated parent adjustment may be strengthened.

Recommendation #3. Better Prepare, Children, Caregivers, and Incarcerated Parents for Reactions to Visitation

Visitation experiences can be highly emotional for all parties. Following a visit with a loved one in a correctional facility, visitors may be left with a number of questions and emotions, and children in particular may require caregiver assistance in processing those emotions. With additional support from caregivers the visitation experience may function as a means of strengthening parent-child relationships rather than as a source of stress, and caregivers are in an ideal position to provide such support to children. However, a caregiver's ability to respond supportively to a child who has just visited an incarcerated parent may be compromised as the caregiver is coping with their own emotional reactions (Arditti, 2003), which may vary greatly depending on their relationship with the incarcerated parent.

Some common reactions children may show following visitation with an incarcerated parent include: hyperactivity, attention problems, difficulty concentrating, and excitability (Dallaire, Ciccone & Wilson, 2010; Johnston, 1995). Shlafer and Poehlmann (2010) found that

some caregivers limited contact with incarcerated parents because of perceived behavioral changes, citing children's confusion, frustration, and upset following visits with the incarcerated parent. Caregivers may interpret such reactions as evidence that visits are not beneficial and thus, they may be reluctant to return for more visits. To better understand caregivers experience of children's post-visitation behavior, Poehlmann and colleagues (2006) examined caregivers' reports of how they handled young children's behaviors prior to, during, and after visits with imprisoned mothers. Their results revealed that caregivers often did not know how to support children around visitation issues. Caregivers perceived children's behaviors before and after visits as a source of stress and as a barrier to facilitating the mother-child relationship. With adequate preparation, however, children's behavioral reactions can be reinterpreted as communication that reflects their emotional needs.

Recommendation #4. Promote and Improve Access to "Low-Tech" Remote Forms of Contact

Over three-fourths of parents incarcerated in U.S. prisons report having mail contact with their children and about half report phone contact (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). Maintaining contact between visitations with mail correspondence and phone calls may help children and parents stay connected. Furthermore, there is evidence that mail contact in particular may benefit children (e.g., Dallaire et al., 2010) and incarcerated parents (Tuerk & Loper, 2006), additionally, it may also foster literacy skills. Of the three primary modes of parent-child contact (e.g., visits, phone and mail contact), mail correspondence is the least costly.

However, several barriers may preclude some families from participating in remote forms of contact with their incarcerated loved ones. In regards to phone contact, many U.S. facilities charge exorbitant rates with prisoner initiated phone calls costing as much as three times more than normal collect calls and five to 10 times more than calls made from a residential phone (Hairston, 1998). Due to this cost, caregivers may not be willing to accept phone calls from incarcerated parents. Although less expensive, mail contact too may have some negative social consequences for families of the incarcerated as a letter from a jail or prison facility is stamped and obviously marked by the institution (Hairston, 2001).

Recommendation #5. Promote and Improve Access to "High-Tech" Remote Forms of Contact

Video-visitation, in which incarcerated individuals interact with loved ones via computer communications systems, is fast emerging as a new avenue for prisoner home contact. Typically, churches or community service agencies use institution-approved video equipment stations in

community agencies near to home families; in some cases, prisons may extend permission to use of home-based computers. The practice builds upon the use of such technology for other purposes, such as telemedicine, by which an inmate consults with a physician at a remote site (Gramlich, 2009) and jail-to-courtroom video communication. The popularity of these two practices is largely based on economics – the opportunity to cut costs for security personnel, transportation, and fees for professionals.

This same logic applies to prisoner home video-visitation. In addition to potential cost-saving for the institution, there are also potential benefits for inmates and associated families. The often prohibitive costs of personal visits are minimized, reducing stress for families. Inmates may enjoy more frequent and more relaxed visits, unencumbered by noisy and uncomfortable visitation settings. Although there is virtually no scientific research concerning the process to date, anecdotal and media reports echo these benefits.

Although proponents stress the value of video-visitation in terms of economic benefits, security, and family connection, a potential untapped benefit from such technology is in enhancing prisoner parenting skills. Although many facilities offer parenting training as part of their rehabilitative offering, a drawback of such training is the very limited opportunities for parents to practice what they learn (Loper & Novero, 2010). When regular and frequent video-visitation is linked to parenting training, incarcerated parents can try out what they are learning. Although scant research has formally looked at this opportunity, a current pilot project regarding re-entry services for mothers in prison (Bush, 2011) in Virginia includes parenting training that includes video-visitation and provides preparation for and coaching during video-visits from instructional staff (Loper & Whalen, 2011). Preliminary feedback from staff and incarcerated individuals indicates this to be a promising and potent boost to parenting education.

There is a need for continued research concerning how to best use this powerful tool. This represents an opportunity to afford benefits for child-friendly and inmate-affirming experiences that promote better parenting practices as well as healthy family connection and communication that can offer benefits not easily available in other contexts for contact. It is imperative that the scientific and service communities join to define and confirm best practices for this innovation.

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