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Building Partnerships to Address Challenging Social Problems

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Building Partnerships to Address Challenging Social Problems

Abstract

A parent in prison creates disruption and stress for the entire family system. In order to provide family programming to this high-risk population, a partnership was created among the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension, UNH Department of Family Studies, and New Hampshire's Department of Corrections. This partnership is called *The Family Connection Project*. Programming objectives are to strengthen at-risk families and improve the healthy development of children with incarcerated parents through a family-centered, strength-based approach. The acquisition of positive parenting/relationship skills is expected to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors in families with an incarcerated parent.

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Introduction

A parent in prison creates disruption and stress for the entire family system. In the United States over 1.7 million people are currently incarcerated in jails and prisons (Gilliard & Beck, 1998). More than one half of state and federal inmates are between the ages of 18 and 34 (Gilliard & Beck, 1998). Approximately 65% of inmates have children under the age of 18, and 6% of women entering prison are pregnant. Currently, nearly 1.5 million children have a mother or father in federal or state prison (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000).

There is evidence that family support for inmates during incarceration, either informal or programmatic, promotes positive behavior during incarceration and reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Borgman, 1985; Fishman, 1982; Schafer, 1994). There is also evidence that children with incarcerated parents are at risk and need support to reduce the likelihood of intergenerational criminal behavior (Adalist-Estrin, 1994).

The Family Connection Project

Because of the high incidence of incarceration and the family issues associated with incarceration, a partnership was created among the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension, UNH Department of Family Studies, and New Hampshire's Department of Corrections (Kazura, Baber, & Temke, 1999). This partnership is called *The Family Connection Project*. Programming objectives are to strengthen at-risk families and improve the healthy development of children with incarcerated parents through a family-centered, strength-based approach. The acquisition of positive family and relationship skills is expected to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors in families with an incarcerated parent.

The participants of this program are parents incarcerated at a New Hampshire state correctional facility and their families. At the current time, the prison population is approximately 500 (450 men and 50 women). A recent study by Kazura (1999) indicated that 73% of the prison inmates are parents (or stepparents), and 58% receive visits from their children.

The correctional facility houses a state-of-the-art rehabilitation program established in 1993. The facility serves non-violent offenders; the majority of offenders committed crimes associated with drug and alcohol use. It offers inmates two programs: 1) a modified therapeutic community, to deal with inmates' substance abuse; and 2) a vocational college program, to assist the inmates with their education and employment needs.

Needs Assessment

Respondents to a needs assessment survey were inmates who either had children or expected to return to homes with children (e.g., partners' children, siblings' children) upon being released from the facility. One hundred thirty-six inmates (99 male, 37 female) who ranged in age from 18 to 49 ($M=29.33$, $SD=7.67$) completed the needs assessment.

The assessment asked inmates to indicate their:

- Needs for education concerning parenting issues,
- Needs for life skills training,
- Concerns regarding finances,
- Needs for visitation programs,
- Partners' need for information about the correctional facility, and
- Needs and their partner's needs for social support services.

Kazura (1999) found that inmates realized and were concerned about how their incarceration was affecting their children's social and emotional development. Many inmates requested information about how to deal with their children's stress and what signs to look for in their children's behavior that may demonstrate the impact of incarceration and/or separation. In addition to parenting issues related to incarceration, these parents wanted basic parenting education concerning discipline and caring for their children. This group of inmates seemed to be motivated to be more knowledgeable and skillful parents; however, there were little to no resources available to them.

Four Programming Strategies Developed from the Needs Assessment

Parent Education Classes

The majority of inmates receive parenting education classes that were designed for parents of young children, school age children, and adolescents. UNH Cooperative Extension trains program staff to conduct their parenting education program, Family Focus (Temke, 2000a; 2000b; 2001). Parents learn about child growth and development, effective discipline, positive communication, supporting children's education, building self-esteem in children, problem solving, decision making, and developing responsibility in children.

Parent Support Groups

Inmates are encouraged to attend parent support/education groups. Program staff and students from the UNH Department of Family Studies are trained to conduct informal parenting support groups for incarcerated parents. In the near future similar support groups will be offered to the inmates' spouses/partners.

Supervised Parent-Child Visitation

A section of the correctional facility has been renovated for supervised visitations between the incarcerated parents and their children. A play room has been designated for parents to interact with their infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and/or young elementary school children. A recreation room has been created for parents to interact with their children who are school-age and adolescents. There are one-way mirrors in each of these rooms so parents may be observed.

A faculty member from the UNH Department of Family Studies trains advanced graduate students and program staff to work in the playroom and recreation room with parents and children in order to model appropriate adult/child interaction. Students also observe parent-child interactions via the one-way mirrors and provide feedback to the parents regarding their parenting style.

Community Outreach via Cooperative Extension

Currently, program staff are partnering with 4-H Youth Development educators in the 10 New Hampshire counties to enroll children of incarcerated parents into community 4-H clubs or other youth development programs. In addition, the program staff works with UNH Cooperative Extension's family development educators to connect spouses/partners to parenting education programs and social services in their communities.

Outcomes

Each of these programming strategies will be extensively evaluated for effectiveness. Expectations are that the data will demonstrate that this is an important program that addresses the risk and protective factors associated with this marginalized population. In addition, it has the potential to lower recidivism and break the cycle of intergenerational transmission of behavior that leads to incarceration.

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