

turning knowledge into practice

Family Strengthening Work with Reentering Fathers, Their Coparents and Children:

Lessons from the National Evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood, Marriage and Family Strengthening Grants for Incarcerated and Reentering Fathers and Their Partners

Sponsored by:

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Conducted by:

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Why Focus Family Strengthening Services on Reentering Fathers and Their Children?

- The number of U.S. children with an incarcerated father increased 77% from 1991-2004 (Glaze and Maruschak, 2008), and is currently estimated at 1.7 million
- These children face separation, stigmatization, disruption in the home environment, loss of family income (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2001)
- Although most incarcerated fathers have some contact with their children during incarceration, many barriers to contact are evident

What Family Strengthening Services Exist for Reentering Fathers and Their Children?

- Few programs exist to support healthy parenting among incarcerated fathers (Day, Acock, Bahr, & Arditti, 2005)
- Attempts to meet this need can be complicated by a gap between correctional agencies and organizations providing family support services
- The most common family strengthening service—parenting class—is received by just 11% of all fathers in state prison (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008)
- Positive coparenting relationships are key to parent-child contact and healthy parenting, but are typically not a focus of programs serving incarcerated fathers

The MFS-IP Initiative

- Up to \$500K/year per grantee for 5 years from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Twelve grantees funded for the full 5-year grant period
- OFA required that programs serve:
 - Biological or non-biological fathers with minor children
 - Must be incarcerated, recently released or under community supervision
 - Must have a spouse or committed partner

MFS-IP Program Characteristics

- Grantees came from a variety of sectors:
 - Correctional agencies, including state prisons, federal prisons, a county prison, and a county pre-release center
 - Human services agencies, including departments of health, social services, and child welfare
 - Community-based non-profits and FBOs
- Service delivery settings also varied:
 - All grantees delivered services in one or more correctional facility (mostly prisons)
 - Most grantees also delivered services in the community (to partners and/or released men)

Program Characteristics (cont'd)

- All sites served incarcerated fathers in committed romantic or coparenting relationships
- Some sites enrolled fathers approaching release and focused on helping families through reentry
- Some sites focused on recently incarcerated men
- All sites provided parenting services in the context of services to strengthen the coparenting relationship

MFS-IP National Evaluation

- A national evaluation was funded jointly by OFA and the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE)
- Aims to document MFS-IP programs and assess the effectiveness of providing family strengthening services to incarcerated individuals and their partners via
 - Implementation study: annual site visits/phone calls with all 12 grantees
 - Impact study: baseline, 9, 18 and 34 month follow-up with 2,010 incarcerated men and 1,480 partners in a subset of sites

Preliminary Baseline Data from MFS-IP Study: Sample Characteristics

- 2,010 incarcerated men and 1,480 partners (74%) completed a baseline interview
- Treatment group includes 1,160 men and 894 women
- Comparison group includes 850 men and 586 women
- Frequencies are presented for the full (combined) sample, including both treatment and comparison/control group members

Preliminary Baseline Data from MFS-IP Study: Relationship and Parenting Status

	Men (2,010)	Women (1,480)
Marital/Relationship Status		
Married	25%	25%
Committed romantic partner	68%	61%
Coparenting only	7%	14%
Romantic relationship with partner prior to incarceration	83%	81%
Parental Status		
At least one child under 18	86%	81%
Median number of children	2.0	2.0

Preliminary Data from Impact Study Baseline Survey: Parenting Prior to Incarceration

During the 6 months prior to father's current incarceration:

- 29% of fathers lived with one child
- 19% of fathers lived with two children
- 19% of fathers lived with three or more children
- 33% of fathers did not live with any of their children
- In 42% (male report) and 33% (female report) of couples, major parenting decisions were made together
- In 36% (male report) and 58% (female report) of couples, the female partner made major parenting decisions herself

Preliminary Data from Impact Study Baseline Survey: Parenting Prior to Incarceration (cont'd)

- “In a typical week during the 6 months before this incarceration, how many days did you participate in an activity with [focal child], such as eating meals, going shopping, helping with homework, or doing something fun with him/her?”
 - 7 days/week: 52%
 - 1-6 days/week: 37%
 - 0 days/week: 11%

Preliminary Data from Impact Study Baseline Survey: Frequency of Parent-Child Contact During Incarceration

	Father Report	Coparent Report
Ever talks on the phone with child	68%	75%
Ever sends mail to child	80%	80%
Ever receives mail from child	59%	67%
Ever receives photos of child	89%	87%
Ever receives personal visits from child	54%	61%

- Frequency of contact varied widely by site: for example, 22% of fathers in MN reported ever receiving a personal visit, compared to 64% of fathers in NY

Preliminary Data from Impact Study Baseline Survey: Barriers to Parent-Child Contact

- Based on both fathers and coparent reports, the following barriers were most likely to be identified as affecting parent-child contact during the father's incarceration:
 - “The prison is located too far away, or is too hard to get to because of transportation issues”
 - “The prison is not a pleasant place to visit, or not a place you want the child to see [you/him]”
 - “The cost of calling or receiving calls is too high, or you do not have access to a phone”

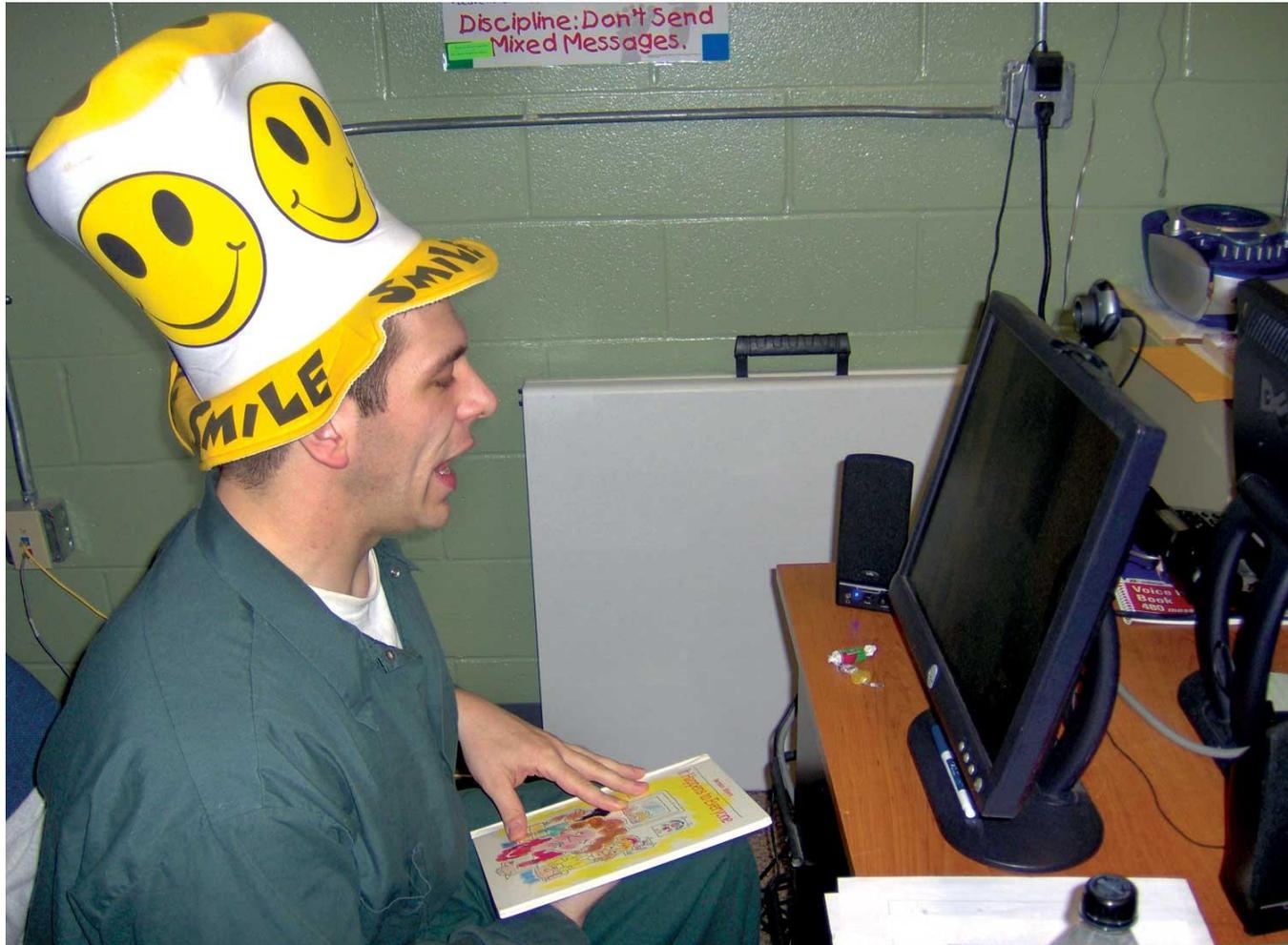
Parenting Supports

- Parenting education (offered in almost all sites)
 - Multi-session courses, typically in a correctional setting
 - Typically offered for fathers only
 - Based on commercial or original parenting curricula
- Support for in-person visitation
 - Child-friendly visitation centers
 - Parent coaching and parent-child activities during visitation
 - Help with visitation logistics and/or expenses

Parenting Supports (cont'd)

- Help with child support and parental rights
 - Establishing or maintaining parental rights
 - Reducing child support orders
 - Reducing or eliminating arrears
 - Restoration of driver's license
- Assistance maintaining long-distance contact with children
 - Audiotape and DVD recording
 - Video visiting
 - Letter-writing supplies

Parenting Supports (cont'd)



Relationship and Family Strengthening Services Delivered

- Focus on coparent relationships was a key feature
- Relationship education (provided in all sites)
 - Single-weekend seminars taught inside correctional facilities, couples or fathers only
 - Multi-session courses in facility or community
 - Some sites augmented with counseling and/or coaching
- Case management for fathers or couples
 - Pre- and post-release
 - Sites differed in frequency, intensity, referral approach

Relationship and Family Strengthening Services Delivered (cont'd)

- Economic stability services
 - Financial literacy classes
 - Job readiness and GED preparation classes
 - Vocational skills assessment
 - Job placement assistance
- Other support services
 - Group cognitive behavioral therapy
 - Life skills classes
 - Empowerment training

Lessons Learned: Supporting Parenting During Incarceration and Reentry

- Emphasize benefits to children when recruiting parents for family strengthening programming
- Support positive parent-child contact during incarceration via child-friendly visitation opportunities, audio book/DVD recording, letter writing support, etc.
- Focus on parenting skills relevant to incarcerated men (e.g., fathering from prison, reuniting with children on release)
- Enhance parenting through skill-building exercises
- Reinforce parenting education via support groups or the creation of a subculture outside of the classroom

Lessons Learned: Supporting Co-Parenting During Incarceration and Reentry

- Assist coparents and other caregivers with challenges to in-person visitation for themselves and their children:
 - defray costs
 - assist with facility approvals
- Support coparents and other caregivers through skills-building and other special activities
- Involve coparents in relationship education courses
- Involve coparents and other family members in planning for reentry (e.g., family group conferencing sessions)

Lessons Learned: Balancing Fidelity with Flexibility

- Plan for and continuously adapt to institutional constraints
- Build healthy partnerships with:
 - Correctional agencies
 - Community-based organizations
 - Domestic violence agencies
- Solicit and incorporate participant feedback

Conclusions and Next Steps

- The final implementation report will document strategies that enabled grantees to meet the unique challenges of delivering couples-based family support to justice-involved families
- Impact study follow-up data will be useful in understanding:
 - What happens to family structures and parenting arrangements during the reentry process
 - Whether participation in family strengthening programming during a father's incarceration impacts child well-being, parenting behavior, provision of material support, or frequency of parent-child contact after release
 - Factors that influence parenting and relationship outcomes among families affected by incarceration

Study Resources and Contacts

- Publications to date available at <https://mfs.rti.org>
- For more information about the National Evaluation of the MFS-IP grants, contact:
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