



Parenting While Incarcerated: Tailoring the Strengthening Families Program for use with jailed mothers[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Most incarcerated women are mothers. Parenting programs may benefit women, children and families, yet effectively intervening in correctional settings is a challenge. An evidence-based parenting intervention (the Strengthening Families Program) was tailored and implemented with women in a jail setting. Goals were to assess mothers' needs and interests regarding parenting while they were incarcerated, adapt the program to address those needs, and establish intervention delivery and evaluation methods in collaboration with a community-based agency. Women reported wanting to know more about effective communication; how children manage stress; finances; drug and alcohol use; self-care; and stress reduction. They reported high program satisfaction and reported reduced endorsement of corporal punishment after the intervention. Barriers to implementation included unpredictable attendance from session to session due to changing release dates, transfer to other facilities, and jail policies (e.g., lock-down; commissary hours). Implications for sustainable implementation of parenting programs in jail settings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Women have been incarcerated at increasingly rapid rates in the United States in the past two decades. The majority of incarcerated women are parents of minor children and over one-third are mothers of multiple children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). Incarcerated mothers report significant concerns about separation from their children and that maintaining a bond with their child is one of the most challenging aspects of incarceration (Kazura, 2001; Poehlmann, 2005). Incarcerated mothers may experience greater distress in this arena than incarcerated fathers (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013) because mothers tend to be children's primary caregivers. Furthermore, incarcerated women who report child-related stress tend to experience more difficulties during their time in the correctional system than women who do not (Houck & Loper, 2002). Child well-being, maternal adjustment, and the mother's likely need to resume the primary caregiving role once released make incarcerated mothers a unique and important population to engage in parenting programs. The current report describes a pilot implementation of a parenting intervention tailored for use with incarcerated

mothers in a jail setting in partnership with a community agency that serves families of children with incarcerated parents (primarily mothers).

1.1. Parenting interventions in correctional settings: challenges and opportunities

Parents who are incarcerated clearly face many challenges. They are (typically) separated from their children, so it can be difficult to maintain an active parenting role (Boudin, 1998; Kazura, 2001). Parents, particularly mothers, in the correctional system have also often experienced poor parenting role models and experience multiple associated challenges (e.g., abuse histories, dysfunctional family relationships; Kjellstrand, Cearley, Eddy, Foney, & Martinez, 2012) that make it difficult to break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. Incarcerated mothers report greater distress than non-parent inmates and more anger than incarcerated fathers (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2013). There are also incarceration-specific stressors around parenting such as worries about how often one may have contact with children and emotional dynamics around visitation (Houck & Loper, 2002). Mothers may lose confidence in their parenting, which may limit their ability to act effectively (Poehlmann, 2005). After being released, mothers indicate that meeting child needs and managing behavior significantly add to stress (Arditti & Few, 2008; Frye & Dawe, 2008; Severance, 2004). While incarcerated, however, mothers can be motivated to develop and/or maintain a positive relationship with their children even if

Abbreviations: PWI, parenting while incarcerated; SFP, Strengthening Families Program.

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they cannot see them regularly (Houck & Loper, 2002; Poehlmann, 2005). This period may thus provide a “teachable moment” of opportunity to intervene and support and strengthen parenting skills. Offering a parenting program in a correctional setting gives mothers a way to focus on their relationship with their children despite being behind bars and can teach mothers effective strategies to manage child behavior that may ease their transition into parenting once released.

The number of parenting programs available for inmates has increased in recent years. A national survey of wardens of state-run correctional facilities found that parenting programs existed in 90% of female-only facilities; most did not involve visitation (Hoffmann, Byrd, & Kightlinger, 2010). Programs vary in their approach and quality (e.g., whether evidence-based or not) and are rarely rigorously evaluated (Burgess & Flynn, 2013). Recent evaluations of corrections-based programs have shown improved parenting attitudes (Palusci, Crum, Bliss, & Bavolek, 2008); decreased parent stress and depression and increased positive child interaction (Eddy, Martinez, & Burraston, 2013); increased knowledge of child development, less endorsement of corporal punishment, and a more mature view of the parenting role (Sandifer, 2008); and reduced distress around visitation (Loper & Tuerk, 2011). Such results are encouraging, yet challenges remain. Most extant parenting interventions in correctional settings are in prisons, where the population is relatively stable. From a prevention and family reunification perspective it would be ideal to intervene with high-risk parents prior to their entry into prison in order to break the cycle of incarceration.

Jail is the point of entry into the correctional system and can cause significant family transition and stress. Jail settings are challenging for program implementation primarily due to the transient nature of the population. They often do not offer rehabilitation or other programs (Katz, 1998). Yet, jail settings provide an opportunity to reach incarcerated mothers, as the great majority of women in local jails have children (Cho, 2010) and jailed women are more likely than men to participate in programs (Meyer, Tangney, Stuewig, & Moore, 2013). There are many potential benefits of working in a jail setting. First, jail stays are typically shorter than prison sentences, so inmates may be able to return home sooner and enact behavioral changes with their children more quickly. This could increase motivation to engage in the intervention and enhance retention of what was learned. Another benefit is location; jails are often situated in the communities where inmates' families live whereas prisons can be hours away (Christian, 2005). Females are often in prisons even farther away from their families than males due to the smaller number of women's prisons (Hoffmann et al., 2010). Thus, it may be more possible for women in jail to receive visits from children, and/or to effectively coordinate with alternate caregivers to maintain a relationship and connections to family and community (Cecil, McHale, Strozier, & Pietsch, 2008). Finally, a jail stay may function as a “wake up call” for some mothers, offering a chance to prevent them from falling deeper into the system.

1.2. Translating parenting programs to the jail context

Implementing a parenting program in a jail setting creates a number of challenges both of a conceptual and logistic nature. Conceptually, one must consider issues that may be uniquely salient. For example, many incarcerated mothers are experiencing drug addiction (Kjellstrand et al., 2012; Mumola, 2000), so addressing this issue is often warranted. Because mothers tend to be primary caregivers it is also vital to consider alternate care arrangements for their children and the quality of the relationship with the alternate caregivers, who may be family members (Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009; Strozier, Armstrong, Skuza, Cecil, & McHale, 2011). Issues of custody and anticipated future caregiving needs also may be relevant. Parenting programs with mothers in jail may need to be adapted to accommodate such concerns.

There are also numerous logistical challenges to implementing such programs in jail. First, many evidence-based parenting programs are

delivered over about 8 to 14 weeks, which can be longer than many jail sentence lengths. Therefore it is important to identify which topics may be most helpful if women can only attend a few sessions (or a single session). Second, as in prison, mothers are separated from children. Research on parenting programs in correctional settings (Block & Potthast, 2001; Perry, Fowler, Heggie, & Barbara, 2010) as well as on the outside (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008) suggests that programs are most effective when they include a practice component. Yet, child visits can be stressful for mothers (Loper et al., 2009) and benefits of visitation may vary with child age (Burgess & Flynn, 2013). Although not all jails have regular child visitation, they are located closer to families, which could make it feasible for women to practice new skills with their children. Understanding how to best integrate visitation as a component of parenting programs in jail settings may be helpful.

Finally, although outcome evaluations have been conducted for some parenting programs in prisons (Eddy et al., 2013; Loper & Tuerk, 2011), most programs are still not evaluated (Burgess & Flynn, 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2010). The transient nature of the jailed population highlights the challenges to both effective implementation and sustainable evaluation. Many participants may not receive much intervention dosage, and it may be difficult to conduct pre- and post-test assessments. Gathering process data to evaluate how evidence-based programs are delivered in real-world contexts is important in order to build a database of “practice-based evidence” (Barkham & Mellor-Clark, 2003; Green, 2006) that can inform adaptation. Given the very limited resources in jail settings, it is also vital to document the process of implementing a parenting program with jailed mothers to inform future efforts to deliver such programming.

1.3. Current study

In the current investigation, a parenting program was implemented with jailed mothers on a pilot basis. Content and logistics were tailored to address mothers' interests and the nature of this setting and parenting attitudes were assessed pre- and post-intervention. The “Parenting While Incarcerated” (PWI) curriculum was based on an existing evidence-based parenting intervention (the Strengthening Families Program; SFP; Kumpfer, DeMarsh, & Child, 1989) previously used with caregivers of children with incarcerated parents (Miller et al., 2013). This work was conducted in partnership with a community agency serving families with an incarcerated parent. Study goals were twofold: 1) use an iterative, participatory process to tailor and implement a parenting program with jailed women; and 2) evaluate the implementation process and program outcomes.

2. Study design and methods

The study was designed to gather “practice-based evidence” by implementing PWI with successive cohorts of jailed mothers. The program was tailored using an iterative process to address mothers' needs and the constraints of the jail setting. After each cohort completed the program, group leader process notes and qualitative feedback from participants were each reviewed in order to adapt program content and delivery details. Process data were analyzed to examine participant satisfaction and attendance. Outcome data were gathered for a subset of participants to assess initial program effectiveness.

2.1. Recruitment and participants

Community partner staff publicized the study and ran intervention groups. University partner research staff conducted informed consent procedures and administered evaluation protocols. The study was approved by the IRB of the university partner. PWI was advertised through flyers and by word of mouth (e.g., at visitation sessions run by the community partner). All mothers of children under 18 at the

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