What are the major program types for incarcerated parents?

Creasie Finney Hairston has identified five major program types for incarcerated parents [6]. These are parent education courses, special parent-child visits, child-oriented visiting activities, parent support groups, and custody and parental rights services.

*Parent Education Courses.* Parent education is the most popular and offered at almost all prisons for women and in some prisons for men. These classes provide education in areas such as child development, parenting techniques, and self-improvement.

*Special Parent-Child Visits.* The second type of programming provides opportunities for the parents to spend extended time with their children on-site at the prison. These visits may be in the form of overnight or special occasion visits that include special programming efforts, meals, arts and crafts, camping, etc. in a structured and well-supervised location at the prison.

*Child-Oriented Visiting Activities.* A third program approach utilizes child-oriented visiting facilities located at the prisons. At these facilities, the children are provided with games or toys to use during the visiting hours. These locations may be part of the regular visiting area, or may be separate from the visiting room. They may be staffed with professional staff members or with trained prison or community volunteers [6].

*Parent Support Groups.* Support groups for parents comprise the fourth model of programs for incarcerated parents. These groups meet on a regular basis and allow inmates to explore a wide variety of topics. Community or staff professionals, volunteer sponsors of the group, or even inmates themselves, often facilitate the groups. These groups sometimes mirror other self-help organizations in structure. They may have officers, hold meetings, fundraise, and even sponsor activities for other inmates.

*Custody and Parental Rights Services.* Finally, services that are provided to help parents maintain custody of and/or communicate with their children may include transportation services that enable the children and the caregivers to travel to the prison, or escort services that bring the children to the prison without their appointed caregivers. This type of program effort may assist inmates in obtaining phone call privileges to communicate with their child, or access to legal services to inform parents of their rights and obligations while incarcerated. [6]
What should be considered when developing programs?

While correctional family programs vary greatly, some key elements have been identified as “lessons learned” when developing programs that work [1]. These are:

- Develop and/or strengthen attachments between the incarcerated parent and the children
- Provide access to a continuum of family support services from sentencing through parole
- Provide structured visits to maximize family time, while preserving security and protecting staff
- Include parenting classes, in combination with visits and support and discussion groups
- Address the specific issues and barriers that incarcerated parents face in parenting, such as long distance parenting, co-parenting with a caregiver who may have no interest in the prisoner or wish that the inmate not be involved in the child’s life, etc.
- Design curricula and programs that are relevant to the offender population and specific cultural and ethnic norms [6]
- Involve correctional staff and inmates in planning programs for inmates
- View family support programs as essential components of release preparation rather than as programs that reward criminal behavior.

Traditional parenting programs generally do not meet the needs of this population. In order to break the cycle of intergenerational criminal activities, effective parenting programming must focus upon maintaining a parent’s presence in children’s lives, even in the form of open adoptions.

Because many women prisoners are victims of sexual or physical abuse, their health care needs are increased.

Because many women prisoners are victims of sexual or physical abuse, their health care needs are increased. Many women enter prison pregnant, or become pregnant while in prison. A great number of incarcerated women suffer from alcohol and substance abuse, which puts them at a greater risk for HIV. Given their poor past health, pregnancies of incarcerated women can be more complicated [7]. Model programs will be inclusive of drug and alcohol screening of all women. Inmates would receive ongoing counseling and drug testing after their initial treatment program, with drug testing to continue upon release.

Bonding between a mother and her children is a two-way street. For incarcerated women, developing and maintaining this bond is difficult. Mothers are often unaware of where their children are, or what is happening to them. Children miss their mothers and blame themselves for the arrest. Bonding requires programs that address the importance of strengthening these relationships.
In addition to the above, programs should be evaluated and replicated, with the use of a national database for dissemination of the information. Although prisons maintain data on prisoners, very few collect data regarding the inmates’ family characteristics, number of children, etc. [6] Training programs for practitioners that provide family support services to incarcerated parents and their children should be instituted [1].

**What types of programs are available today?**

Many innovative programs exist that help meet the needs of children with incarcerated parents. For example, some states utilize nurseries to allow mothers in prison to nurture their young children. However, only two states continue to provide formal prison nurseries today: Nebraska and New York [10,13]. Both programs stress the development of the nurturing relationship between the mother and her child, while providing parenting classes to educate the women in their parenting role, and enhance their child rearing skills.

**Challenges in Program Development**

Many challenges exist in developing programs designed to maintain the connection between women and their children, such as:

- A widespread societal belief that making prison miserable will discourage offenders from committing other crimes
- Prison environments discourage visits from children and their guardians
- Prisons are located long distances away
- There is a lack of dependable and affordable public transportation
- The use of invasive search procedures at the prisons
- Limitations regarding food in visitation areas [10].

In some short-term facilities, young children are not allowed to visit, or there is no physical contact allowed between children and their mothers. The fear of liability and established regulations may inhibit maintaining a relationship between a mother in prison and her children.

**Nebraska Correctional Center for Women**

The program in the Nebraska Correctional Center was established in 1976 under the Department of Corrections. It provides a nursery program that allows inmate mothers to keep their babies near them while they are incarcerated. The mothers and infants are housed together and the care of the infant is the primary responsibility of the inmate mother, who must take child development courses. Childbirth classes are offered, and infants may stay with their mother up to 18 months of age. Overnight and day child visits are also offered [13].

Contact Information:
Nebraska Correctional Center for Women
(402) 362-3317
1107 Recharge Road
York, NE 68467
Mary Alley, Parenting Program Coordinator
New York Program Model – The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

The Bedford Hills Correctional Facility Children’s Center allows overnight and summer visits for older children. The program was founded in 1901, is funded by the Department of Correctional Services, and is administered by Catholic Charities. It is an inmate-centered program. Inmates have the major responsibility for the many activities, with oversight provided by professional program staff. Four inmate caregivers in the Center have earned their credentials as Child Development Associates through an accredited program that prepares graduates to teach in an accredited nursery school anywhere in the country. Other inmates are currently enrolled in this program.

The Center’s main program is designed to provide a warm and inviting atmosphere for children to visit their mothers. There are efforts to keep inmates informed about the status of their children’s physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being while they are apart.

The center is open 365 days a year, with a well-equipped and cheerful playroom for children to visit their mothers unescorted. The room is also used to allow the children to play together while the adults converse, thus increasing the friendships among the children, and allowing them to realize that there are other children that experience the same issues.

A wide range of programs are housed in the Bedford Center, representing the most comprehensive set of programs available to children with incarcerated parents in the country. These services and programs include:

- bilingual parenting
- children’s advocate office
- a program that focuses on personal responsibility
- foster care composed of outside staff foster care advisors and inmates
- holiday activities
- infant day care
- a mental hygiene program
- parenting and prenatal courses
- Story Corner, which allows women to tape record children’s books on tape for their children
- a transportation clinic that provides transportation for caregivers and children
- a program to provide necessities for mothers leaving the prison with their new babies
- a toy library where mothers can choose specific toys for their children to take home
- a nursery where mothers can remain with their infants for up to one year
- a foster home for children that have no other family members to care for them.

Contact information:
Children’s Center at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility
(914) 241-3100 Ext. 4050
247 Harris Road
Bedford Hills, NY 10507
childrens_center@mindspring.com
Toni Campoamor, Director
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Reading Family Ties: Face to Face</td>
<td>This program was developed in February of 2000. The program allows incarcerated mothers in two rural central Florida institutions to have weekly family visits via the use of high-speed videoconferencing technology. Once a date and time is selected, a Miami site coordinator confirms the visit with the institutional coordinator. Under constant supervision, the inmate is then taken to a room that is equipped with a computer, camera and speakerphone. It is there that the mother reads a story to her children. Two non-profit agency partners in Florida provide transportation for the children to the reading sites and publicize the program [2].</td>
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<td>Girl Scouts Behind Bars</td>
<td>This program began in 1992 as a National Institute of Justice pilot program in Maryland. The program serves daughters aged 5 to 13 who join their mothers two Saturdays a month for a Girl Scout troop meeting in a prison or jail setting. During these two-hour sessions, the women spend supervised time with their daughters working on troop projects [11].</td>
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<td>The Motheread Program</td>
<td>Incarcerated mothers in North Carolina are taught how to read stories aloud using expressive manners and techniques to engage children’s attention. Inmates read these books/stories, or compose stories of their own, and are videotaped. This tape is then sent with the book to the child so they are able to follow along while watching and listening to the video. Mothers are taught literacy skills and parenting while they discuss the themes in the children’s stories they are reading [9].</td>
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<td>Mothers/Men Inside Loving Kids (M.I.L.K.) Program</td>
<td>This program was originally sponsored by the Parents Anonymous (PA) program in Virginia for mothers in prisons and jails in Virginia and then later expanded to include men. Incarcerated parents are provided with a range of programming, including child development, parent education, and independent living skills classes; weekly ongoing support and education programs; and 4 to 6 daylong contact visits with their children. Local volunteers provide transportation and food for the contact visits [5].</td>
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<td>The DC Family Literacy Program</td>
<td>Began in 1991, the Literacy Program is run through a law school. The program serves both men and women. Families meet one time a week for three months to read books, sing songs, and share stories with their children aged eight months to sixteen years [12].</td>
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<td>Program</td>
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<td><strong>Options Center, Inc.</strong></td>
<td>Options Center Inc. was established in 1992. It operates a program called Generations that provides counseling, tutoring, mentoring, referrals and advocacy for children of incarcerated parents. Generations serves the children of incarcerated parents living in Washtenaw County.</td>
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<td><strong>S.A.D.O.I. (Sons and Daughters of the Incarcerated)</strong></td>
<td>The SADOI project works specifically with the children of the incarcerated by providing direct counseling, dealing with the psychological, emotional and social stigmas directly associated with the incarceration of a parent. The project serves residents of Washtenaw county.</td>
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<td><strong>Children’s Visitation Program (CVP)</strong></td>
<td>CVP provides consistent visits between the mother and her children, ongoing support groups, assessment of child/caregiver needs, advocacy for children, assistance with the mother’s parole plan, and full reunification support. Services are provided at Scott’s Correctional Facility located in Plymouth, MI under the guidance of the Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency (MCCD).</td>
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<td><strong>Fathers Behind Bars, Inc.</strong></td>
<td>Fathers Behind Bars, Inc., established in 1994, provides publications and technical assistance on self-help support groups for incarcerated fathers. The program serves incarcerated fathers in the USA and Canada.</td>
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<td><strong>Project S.E.E.K. (Services to Enable and Empower Kids)</strong></td>
<td>Project S.E.E.K. provides tutoring and support groups, informational groups, family outings, emergency assistance, referrals, and transportation. The program serves incarcerated parents, their families and their children who live in Genesee County.</td>
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