

Developing an Effective Intervention for Incarcerated Teen Fathers

The Baby Elmo Program

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Recent estimates suggest that parental incarceration affects 1 in every 40 children in the U.S. (National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, 2007). In 2007, there were 890,000 parents in prison (an increase of 79% from 1991); of these incarcerated parents, 92% were fathers (Schirmer, Nellis, & Mauer, 2009). According to the most recent data from a 2006 census of juveniles in residential placement conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), there are approximately 75,000 14–18-year-old men in residential placement, with an overrepresentation of minorities (40% African American, 21% Hispanic, 1.7% Native American). Up to an estimated 30% of all incarcerated male teens are fathers (Nurse, 2002). Prisons and other residential detention facilities offer little opportunity for contact with outside friends and family, making parent absenteeism an unfortunate reality.

Incarceration can dramatically change how much fathers invest in their children, as well as their level of involvement (Braman & Wood, 2003), which affects the maintenance of positive paternal identities and often damages relationships between the father and child (Dyer, 2005). The absence of a father figure has been linked to very poor developmental outcomes, including poor achievement in school, impaired cognitive function, aggression, and delinquency (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2002). Furthermore, children with

incarcerated parents are highly vulnerable to maladjustment and more likely to be delinquent, use drugs, experience early pregnancy, drop out of school, and exhibit emotional problems (Murray, 2005; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, & Kennon, 1999; Trice & Brewster, 2004) than their peers whose parents are not incarcerated. Conversely, positive father involvement plays a significant role in self-regulation and social competence (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Coley, 1998). Findings from the Early

Abstract

The absence of a father figure has been linked to very poor developmental outcomes. The Baby Elmo Program, a parenting and structured visitation program, aims to form and maintain bonds between children and their incarcerated teen fathers. The program is taught and supervised by probation staff in juvenile detention facilities. This intervention is based on building a relationship between the teen and his child, rather than on increasing the teen's abstract parenting knowledge. Because the intervention is conducted in the context of parent–child visits, it fosters hands-on learning and increases the opportunity for contact between these young fathers and their children, a benefit in itself. An evaluation of the program indicated improvements in quality of interactions and communication; this increase in the interactional quality of the relationship increases the likelihood that the father and child will form and maintain a positive relationship.

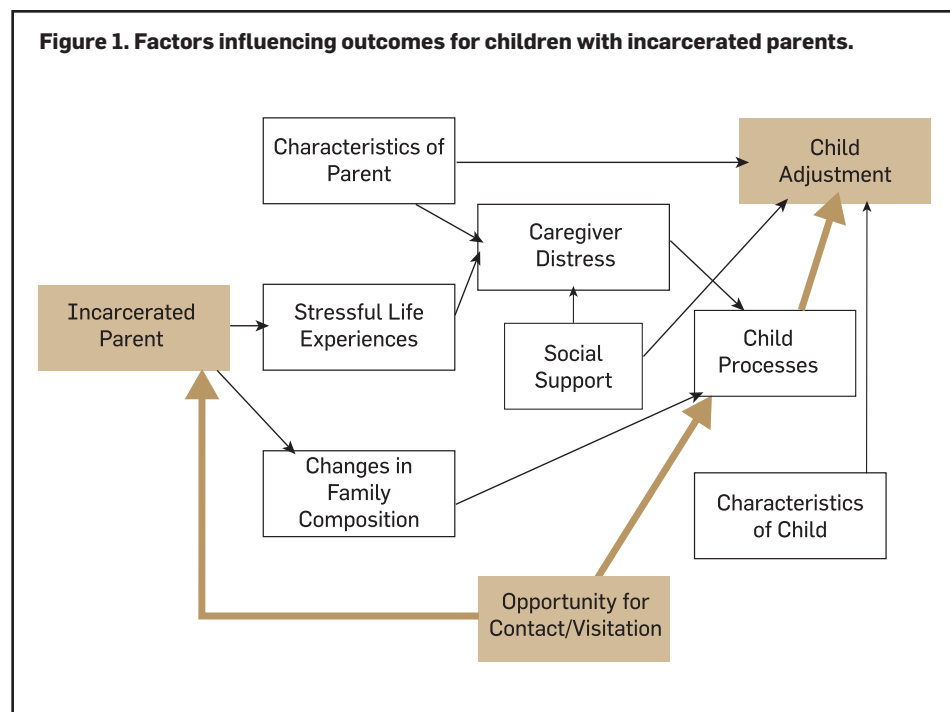
Head Start program have demonstrated that when biological fathers remain in contact with their children from birth to 3 years, regardless of whether the fathers are resident in the home or not, children show lower levels of aggressive behavior and better emotion regulation (Vogel, Bradley, Raikes, Boller, & Shears, 2006).

Father–Child Attachment

ALTHOUGH MULTIPLE FACTORS can influence both the child and the incarcerated teen father (see Figure 1), studies with incarcerated adults have shown that opportunities for contact or visitation have positive outcomes for both parent and child (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003). Fathers who develop strong bonds with their children have lower levels of post-release depression and recidivism (Nurse, 2002), and these relationships can be improved through increased contact during the incarceration period (LaVigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro, 2005).

From a developmental perspective, several theories are relevant to understanding the consequences of parental incarceration. Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory serves as a framework to aid in understanding the importance of the development of the parent–child relationship. The function of the attachment system is to protect a person from danger by ensuring that she maintains proximity to attachment figures who provide support, protection, and comfort in times of stress (Bowlby, 1982). *Attachment theory* proposes that interactions with a primary caregiver during childhood result in episodic memories that form secure or insecure ideas of what a relationship should be in adulthood. Infants can develop strong attachments to their fathers (Parke, 2002), but the lack of opportunity for regular and sustained contact between an infant and father will prevent the development of this attachment, which could detrimentally impact the child (Sroufe, 1997).

Recent work in developmental science has suggested that fathers play a much larger role than mothers in the socialization of children's emotions (Cabrera et al., 2000; Clarke-Stewart, 1978). Fathers have a tendency to engage infants in non-object-mediated interaction that is both physical and stimulating, whereas mothers tend to be more calm and verbal with infants and engage primarily in visual object-centered play (Clarke-Stewart, 1978; Power & Parke, 1983; Yogman, 1981). The quality of the parent–child interaction is more important than the quantity of involvement (Brown, McBride, Shin, & Bost, 2007); this may be even truer for fathers who engage in physical play with their children (Parke, 2000). In fact, even with increasing involvement, father–child



attachment security decreases if the quality of the interactions is poor. Father–child physical play has been linked to positive socioemotional development in children. Fathers teach children, particularly boys, to modulate and contain their aggressive behaviors through rough-and-tumble play (Herzog, 1982). Amato and Rezac (1994) have also demonstrated that boys from single-parent families who continue to have contact with their fathers have fewer behavioral problems than those who have no contact with their fathers.

The Baby Elmo Program

THE BABY ELMO Program, a parenting and structured visitation program for incarcerated teen fathers, targets the father–child relationship and aims to enhance the quality of interactions, foster secure attachments, and maintain strong bonds during the period of incarceration. Increasing the quality of interactions should boost the fathers' perceptions of their role as fathers and the importance of parenthood, hopefully leading to fewer aggressive tendencies and parole violations postrelease. Increasing the quality of relationships between the father and child could also reduce recidivism rates. The importance of focusing on the family unit stems from claims that post-release success is higher among inmates who have maintained family ties during incarceration (Hairston, 2001) and that opportunities to maintain contact with the parent during the period of separation will modify the nature of the parent–child relationship, which, in turn, will affect the child's adjustment. (See Figure 1.)

How the Baby Elmo Program Started

The Baby Elmo Program began as a collaborative project between 2005 ZERO TO THREE Fellows Carole Shauffer and Rachel Barr. Shauffer, a lawyer and director of the Youth Law Center, is an advocate for children involved in the welfare system. Barr, a psychologist at Georgetown University, studies parent–infant interactions and infant learning and memory. During the course of the fellowship, Shauffer and Barr discussed the possibility of developing an accessible intervention for incarcerated teen fathers who did not typically have contact visits with their babies. Adopting a strengths-based approach, media was incorporated into the intervention to maximize its utility for incarcerated teens, who typically have low literacy rates but a high affinity for and proficiency with digital media. Shauffer and Barr believed that the *Sesame Street* characters were well known to both the fathers and babies, providing an initial bridge between them. The program was originally named “A Parenting Intervention for Incarcerated Teen Parents,” but teen parents called it the “Baby Elmo Program” in honor of the famous red character shown at the parenting sessions. This nickname was the first sign of the affection the youth felt for the program. The Baby Elmo Program is available to both mothers and fathers, but an overwhelming majority of program participants are teen fathers. Essentially, the Baby Elmo Program is a parenting class, but the curriculum teaches relationship basics, focusing on how fathers can play and interact with their babies rather than covering practical basics such as changing diapers. Shauffer and Barr



Parenting from a distance: The Juvenile justice setting is typically not conducive to forming a father-child attachment.

consulted with Mary Dozier of the University of Delaware, an early intervention expert, to develop an effective relationship-based curriculum that could be delivered by facility staff.

What Is the Baby Elmo Program?

The theoretical approach for the Baby Elmo Program is derived from Bronfenbrenner's *ecological theory of development*, which states that child development must be considered within the multiple relationships and systems that surround the child (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). When this model is applied to children of incarcerated parents, the environment of the detention facility and the personnel in those facilities also form a system that affects the incarcerated youth and the infant's development. Therefore, an effective intervention should target and assess not only the teen father or the teen father-child dyad, but also focus on the juvenile detention environment and personnel (Bronfenbrenner & Morris; Loper & Tuerk, 2007; Murray & Farrington, 2005; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). The characteristics of these systems all pose interrelated potential risks and opportunities for resilience. A strictly task-focused, direct approach in prevention and intervention cannot succeed; instead, an intervention must focus not only on the needs of the parent, but rather on a rewarding and resilient parent-child relationship (Bernstein, Hans, & Percansky, 1991).

Elements of the Intervention

There are three components to the Baby Elmo Program: modification of the environment, parent training sessions, and structured parent-child visits.

MODIFICATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The first element of the program is the modification of the environment. When facilities do allow visitation, the experience

can be difficult for both parent and child, because the visit often occurs in noncontact form through glass or for short periods of time in a lunchroom or office. The child is brought into an unfamiliar place with nothing available (no toys, puzzles, or books) for the parent and very young child to play with. Institutions do not offer teen parents, who frequently have not had positive parenting themselves, the support necessary to prepare for a visit or deal with the difficult situations that arise during visits, such as a child's unwillingness to engage with a parent who has been absent. In this intervention, juvenile detention facilities were required to set up a play context by converting one of their rooms to a more child-friendly atmosphere (see Figure 2).

The Baby Elmo Program is specifically designed to be implemented independently by juvenile facilities with limited outside staffing and financial support. In addition, the program supports institutional security and habilitation by providing incentives for youth to comply with institutional standards, and it increases community contact. Detention staff and volunteers are trained to administer the intervention. The program was developed for facilitators who do not have extensive training in child development; the lessons are designed for use by staff members who routinely supervise and counsel youth in the facility, making the program less expensive and easier to implement. It is important to note that this also means that learning continues while the teen is in the unit and fosters a better relationship between the incarcerated minor and juvenile detention staff.

The choice of facility staff as program facilitators has had some unforeseen positive consequences. The program necessitates increased contact between staff and youth in the facility during training and visit sessions. During the course of the intervention, staff members frequently model parenting and share parenting experiences with the teen

father, establishing a point of commonality between them. In one example, a staff member who had a conflictual relationship with a teen father walked by while the young man was visiting with his baby. The staff member gave advice and started interacting with the parent and child. Supervisory staff reported that the relationship between the staff member and the young man was subsequently substantially improved. Facilitators have independently added graduation ceremonies to celebrate the end of the program, in which the facilitators prepare graduation certificates, bring in food, and invite family members to join in the celebration. In one instance, the child's caregiver was her great-grandparent. Both the caregiver's daughter and grandson were incarcerated, and this was the first graduation that the great-grandparent had attended.

This improvement in relations between staff and youth is also facilitated by improvements to youth behavior on the unit. As Don Meyer, chief probation officer at the Sacramento Juvenile Detention Hall, pointed out,

I did a lot of 'Tail 'em, Jail 'em' in my career, but the first time I saw this program, I could not believe that the same kid we had in the unit who was causing trouble could be taught parenting skills. But it works. And it spills over. They start to see the advantages of making the connection with their own baby, and it shows in their behavior. (Gonzalez, 2011)

Figure 2. The Baby Elmo room at Santa Maria Juvenile Hall offers a warm welcome for fathers and their children, with brightly colored toys, alphabet floor tiles, and a mural of Sesame Street's Elmo painted by youth in the facility.



Photo courtesy of Santa Maria Juvenile Hall.

PARENT TRAINING SESSIONS

The second component of the program, the parent training sessions, targets the interactional quality of the relationship by introducing relationship, communication, and socioemotional enhancing techniques. Each training session focuses on a specific concept such as attachment or separation anxiety. *Separation anxiety* occurs when a baby separates from a trusted and well-known caregiver and is most prevalent between 8 and 18 months of age. If the father has not seen his child for some time, the baby may show separation anxiety from his caregiver and be fearful of his father. It is discouraging for fathers when their own babies appear to be afraid or do not know them. If, however, fathers are equipped with the knowledge that separation anxiety is an important developmental milestone, they can be prepared for the baby to be upset and not misinterpret the situation. This knowledge is also shared between fathers in the program, who let each other know that initially their babies also experienced separation anxiety.

This program incorporates both cognitive/language development and social-emotional development—both of which are critical skills for the parent in creating a relationship with an infant and promoting healthy child development (Bernstein et al., 1991; Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn, & Haynes, 2008; Dozier et al., 2006). Concepts introduced in the first three sessions aim to establish or reestablish a relationship with the child and cover concepts of separation anxiety, exploration of the environment, and following the child's lead. Sessions 4–6 focus on communication development, emphasizing the importance of praising the child, labeling, and asking questions. Sessions 7–9 focus on socioemotional development, stressing the role of physical affection, modeling, and imagination. The final session is a review of all the skills presented throughout the program.

These parent training sessions, led by a staff member or volunteer, were adapted for use within the juvenile detention facility. A systematized program manual, incorporating several intervention components from Dozier and colleagues (2006), guides the detention staff through each topic. Each lesson is accompanied by video segments from the *Sesame Street Beginnings* videos that model positive parent-child interactions. The teen fathers have the opportunity to plan activities, based on the session topic, for the upcoming visit with their child. For example, during the first session, the teen father views a clip on playing peek-a-boo, mirror play, and making funny faces. These games are well liked by children from infancy to 3 years, and they act as ice-breakers for fathers

establishing or reestablishing relationships with their child. The facilitator and the teen father then discuss which of these games he will try with his child during the visit.

STRUCTURED PARENT-CHILD VISITS

The final component of the program, structured visitation with the child, gives the incarcerated father the opportunity to practice the concepts from the training sessions with his child (see Figure 3). The following examples illustrate how the program is beneficial during and after incarceration. An 18-year-old teen father and his 4-year-old daughter participated in the program in San Bernardino County. During each visit, the daughter used the alphabet floor tiles to spell out her name for her father. Her father had poor literacy skills and was concerned that soon he would not be able to keep up with his daughter. After these interactions, he requested additional help to learn to read. The facility was able to provide him with a reading tutor, and he started to make progress. The visits with his child provided an incentive for him to benefit from access to educational resources while he was incarcerated.

A 17-year-old teen father in Orange County participated in the program with his 20-month-old son. Initially they were very timid in their interactions with one another. Across the sessions, however, the number of positive interactions and duration of the turn-taking episodes between father and son increased dramatically. For example, rates of book reading accompanied by labels and questions increased in frequency. The increase

in language by the father was accompanied by increased vocalizations by his son.

When the authors followed up with this father 18 months after he completed the Baby Elmo Program, he was still in frequent contact with his son. This was despite the fact that by then he was not in a relationship with the child's mother. At that time he had been released from the program and held a full-time job at an amusement park. After completing his shift early one morning, he drove to San Diego to give a presentation to the California Association of Probation Institution Administrators to encourage other facilities to adopt the program. He and his son made a video for the conference to demonstrate the strength of their relationship. In the video, the father is playing with an Elmo toy. His son is sitting on his father's knee but clearly wants to get away: He goes over to the toy box and picks out a smaller Elmo toy—so that big Elmo and little Elmo can play together. This example illustrates the potential for this type of intervention to build skills and relationships during incarceration and for them to be maintained after release.

Other program participants have argued that they would be back in custody if the Baby Elmo Program had not illustrated the program's potential to reduce recidivism rates. One 16-year-old father participated with his 2-month-old son in Sacramento County. Gonzales (2011) reported that the father said "I'll be honest with you, I'd be back in jail now without my son and the skills I learned." He stated, "I'm not going to act like a fool. Now, I just want to be the best father in

Figure 3. A father-child visit.



Photo printed with permission from caregiver and youth.



Father-infant interactions include physical play that is important for social and cognitive development.

the world.” Meyer, chief parole officer at the Sacramento facility, argued that, if effective, the program could lead to future fiscal savings. “When you look at the cost benefits, a \$15,000 average to prosecute an adult in this county, another \$50,000 to send them to prison if you have to—if we can reduce reoffending by 10% to 20%, you can save a lot on the back end” (Gonzales, 2011).

Program Outcomes

ONE OF THE aims of the Baby Elmo Program was to increase emotional responsiveness in the teen fathers. Emotional responsiveness is correlated with positive developmental outcomes including emotional security, social facility, symbolic competence, verbal ability, and intellectual achievement; it is necessary for optimal child socioemotional, cognitive, and communicative development (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Bernstein et al., 1991; Bornstein et al., 2008; Dodici, Draper, & Peterson, 2003). Such a relationship involves an active parent who tries to elicit attention from the child, participates in age-appropriate interactions, adjusts to meet the child’s interests, and attempts to maintain the child’s focus through communication and engaged interaction rather than through restrictions or intrusions. Getting these teen parents to adopt a new interactional style is a challenge, but research has suggested that a new interactional style can be adopted when parents are taught how

and why it is important (Hart & Risley, 1995; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998). Evaluators coded six different subscales of emotional responsiveness (Joint Attention, Emotional Engagement, Parental Involvement, Child Involvement, Turn-Taking, and Following the Lead) for 20 minutes of each parent-child visit. Twenty father-infant dyads, with infants ranging in age from 6 to 36 months, participated in the evaluation. Individual growth curve analyses showed significant gains in measures of emotional responsiveness. There were significant increases found for measures of joint attention, child involvement, turn-taking, and following the lead. These preliminary findings are very promising. Increasing verbal and nonverbal forms of communication between these teen fathers and their infants is crucial to developing and maintaining healthy relationships during and after incarceration (see Barr et al., 2011, for full details).

How to Make It Work: Lessons Learned

THE INTERVENTION HAS NOW been implemented in 6 counties in California, and it will be implemented in Ohio later this year. Facilities have obtained funding to implement the program from grants (e.g., First Five Initiative, the Tobacco tax fund for California for supporting initiatives aimed at children under 5 years of age), discretionary accounts (e.g., Santa Barbara includes monies that come from the wood-splitting business run by Los Prietos Boys Camp), or through volunteer organizations. One of the biggest obstacles in implementing the program is securing transportation for the caregiver and baby to the facility. Fresno County was able to provide some gas cards to caregivers and Santa Barbara, Sacramento, and Fresno counties provide an incentive for caretakers in the form of diapers and toiletries (e.g., lotions, wipes, and soaps, and small toys) to show appreciation for participation in the program.

Successful fatherhood programs offer a diversity of activities and use men as peer mentors for one another (McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004; Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, & Pruett, 2009). During group training sessions, fathers encourage one another by sharing the difficulties and successes in establishing connections with their children. In Orange County, the fathers even wanted to form a parenting playgroup after release, but this was prohibited by conditions of parole.

Conclusion

IN HIS 2010 Father’s Day message, President Obama said that, although he had a “heroic mom and wonderful grandparents,” an absent father is “something

that leaves a hole in a child’s heart that a government can’t fill.” He went on to say,

Just because your own father wasn’t there for you, that’s not an excuse for you to be absent also. It is all the more reason for you to be present. . . . You have an obligation to break the cycle and to learn from those mistakes, and to rise up where your own fathers fell short and to do better than they did with your own children.

Developmental psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated that in intact father-present families, the quality of father-child involvement is more clearly linked to children’s developmental outcomes than quantity of involvement (Parke, 1996). Positive father involvement, regardless of whether or not the father resides with the child, plays a significant role in emotion regulation and social competence, benefits that last across the lifespan (Coley, 1998; Vogel et al., 2006). The evaluation results indicated improvements in quality interactions and communication; this increase in the interactional quality of the relationship increases the likelihood that the individuals in the dyad will form and maintain a positive relationship with one another (Barr et al., 2011).

The Baby Elmo Program is the first to combine a media-based parenting program with child visitation within the juvenile detention facilities. Preliminary results, including the enthusiasm of detention facility staff members and their commitment for the program, are promising. This project builds on previously established findings that parents’ perceptions of their influence on their child’s development changes as a function of early intervention, demonstrating that incarceration presents an opportunity to strengthen ties between parent and child and improve parenting skills (Eddy, Powell, Szubka, McCool, & Kuntz, 2001; Kazura, 2001; Nurse, 2002; Parra-Cardona, Wampler, & Sharp, 2006). Several studies of both juvenile and adult inmates have shown that maintenance of ties with family are associated with reduced recidivism (Adams & Fischer, 1976; Hairston, 2001; Klein, Bartholomew, & Hibbert, 2002; Ohlin, 1954; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2003) and is an important element of successful reentry into society (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004; Sampson & Laub, 1993). The father-child relationship is an important focus for future research and policy efforts in the field of juvenile justice. Strengthening the parent-child relationship through increased positive interactions during the incarceration period is a crucial element of rehabilitation for the parent and encourages the parent to form and maintain a relationship with the child. To sum up how the program achieves

these goals, in the words of one of the Baby Elmo participants at the end of the program, “My heart melts when I see my daughter laughing and smiling at me. The weekends are the only time I have the opportunity to be a father to my baby. If [it] wasn’t for this program I’d be a stranger to my daughter. She wouldn’t even know I exist.”

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Quality Parenting Initiative in Florida and California, a project to improve the recruitment and retention of quality foster parents. Carole was a 2005 ZERO TO THREE Fellow.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the participation of detention facilities in Fresno, San Bernardino, Orange, Yolo, Santa Barbara, and Sacramento, California, and we are especially grateful to Don Meyer, Susan Coleman, Manual Silva, Doug Sanger, Naomi McCormack, Laurie Holbrook, and Nancy Taylor-Farrah. Funding for the program has been provided by the California First Five Commissions, the Van Loben Sels Rembe Rock Foundation, California Wellness Foundation, and the Georgetown University Reflective Engagement Initiative Grant. Funding to prepare this article was provided by the Raymond A. and Rosalee G. Weiss Innovative Research and Programs Grant and American Psychological Foundation Visionary Grant to Rachel Barr and Carole Shaffer. In particular we thank the fathers, caregivers, and babies for their participation in the study.

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