

Innovative program reaches out to incarcerated teenage fathers

Shirley Jahad | March 30th, 2014, 8:00am



An outreach program dubbed the "Baby Elmo Program" attempts to break the cycle of violence by teaching parenting skills to incarcerated teenage fathers.

As advocacy groups look for ways to help troubled young families, most of the effort is usually focused on mentoring teenage mothers. A small but growing program is taking a different approach, by reaching out to incarcerated young fathers to help them learn basic parenting skills. Earlier this week, the program founders held a conference in Los Angeles so detention officers from around the state could learn more about the initiative.

Originally named "A Parenting Intervention for Incarcerated Teen Parents," the program was later dubbed the "[Baby Elmo Program](#)" by its teenage participants, referring to the Sesame Street teaching tools it uses. According to the program's manager, the key message they try to pass on to troubled young fathers is the importance of making personal contact with their children. "The only way you

are going to develop a relationship with your child is not through abstract courses or a strict program," said Ben Richeda, who runs the program. "It's really going to be 'I know the food my child likes. I know what makes him smile. I know what makes her laugh when she comes in the room.'" Richeda says the goal is to teach the parenting skills in order to break the cycle of abuse and neglect that can lead to a path of delinquency.

It can be difficult to implement the program, since most prisons don't allow family visits because of security concerns and limited staffing. Jessica Sammons is a deputy juvenile corrections officer in Orange County. She has been working solo to get the program up and running there, making the effort along with all of her regular duties. She says the family visits are what make the difference.

"You can talk all day on the phone or in the group, but until you're hands-on with that kid, picking that kid up, touching them, holding them, looking at the fact that he's got your eyes and your nose, it's not going to make a difference." In just over a year, Sammons has had a couple of teen fathers complete the training.

There has been an effort to measure the results of the program. Each visit between an incarcerated father and child is videotaped and [child development experts at Georgetown University](#) evaluate the encounters. But just a handful of other California counties have introduced the program, which got its start in 2008. So far, about 130 youth from facilities in Sacramento, Fresno, Santa Barbara and San Bernardino have participated.



Shirley Jahad, *Reporter and Host, Weekend Edition*