

# Breaking the Cycle: Prison Reading Program Encourages Literacy

**Diane Walden**

*Intergenerational low-literacy is fact. This prison reading program helps break the cycle of low literacy and criminal activity, directly addressing the situation of parenting from prison head-on. It could also be adapted for non-custodial parents in many situations.*

Read to the Children, created by correctional librarian Joyce Attebery in 1999, provides materials and an opportunity for an offender to read a book aloud onto a cassette tape to mail to her/his child. This program serves to maintain the parent-child tie during incarceration, increase literacy, strengthen family relationships for post-release success, and, we believe, lower recidivism.

In order to participate, offenders send the library a request that is evaluated by the case manager. Approval is based on review of the offender's record to confirm s/he is the parent, and there is no prohibition of contact between offender and child. Offenders with temporary loss of privileges due to behavior problems forfeit participation until privileges are regained.

After the offender obtains approval, s/he schedules time in the library. The first-time reader begins by becoming familiar with the selection of books available. S/he is coached by library staff and trained peers to choose a book that s/he enjoys and that is appropriate for the age and reading ability of the child. The parent is taught the importance of reading with emphasis and using different voices for characters. Tips are given to relax, have fun, and read slowly, keeping in mind that the child will be reading along. A short introduction before starting to read the book and closing remarks to the child are allowed. There are no restrictions on the length of the book; most range from six to sixty pages. Some parents have filled the entire sixty-minute tape, but the average reading session lasts about fifteen minutes. After review by library staff for breaches of security, the book and tape are packaged with a reply questionnaire for the primary caregiver to fill out and are then mailed to the child's home.

Several stereotypes about offenders are perpetuated by studies and corrections staff. One is

the belief that offenders are bad people; therefore, they are bad parents. Another is that offenders do not have frequent and direct contact with their children. A third is that male offenders take no interest in fatherhood. Still another is the idea that offenders were part of a nuclear family before incarceration and that the family is awaiting her/his return.

In fact, offenders become involved in activities, programs, and services they did not participate in prior to incarceration. This may be due to availability, affordability, lack of diverse choices for activities, or a genuine desire to make changes. For many, treatment and therapy were not an option prior to incarceration. For some, introspection-especially when they are clean and sober-is foreign. Realizing that s/he could be a better parent and pursuing that end are new options.

However, learning to parent is stymied by a lack of parenting programs. Only 42 percent of state facilities offer parenting classes.' Read to the Children is a nonthreatening way to begin or reestablish a relationship for the incarcerated parent, child, and caregiver.

In 1999, an estimated 1.5 million children under the age of eighteen were affected by the incarceration of their parent(s). Twenty-two percent were under five years old and the average age was eight.<sup>2</sup> As the prison population increases, so does the number of affected children. The National Literacy Act of 1991 states that the pattern of poor literacy skills is similar to the pattern of poverty in the United States. Those who cannot read and those who are not economically self-sufficient are largely the same population. Poor children also face a greater risk of malnutrition, health problems, child abuse, educational disability, low achievement, and school dropout.<sup>3</sup>

The low literacy skills of offenders are well documented. The National Adult Literacy Survey found that one-third of offenders performed at the lowest of five levels of literacy. At this level, they are unable to complete a form to obtain a library card, total the costs of a purchase, or find a location on a map. Another one-third of offenders performed at the second lowest of the five levels. Tasks such as using a bus schedule or maintaining a checkbook are not consistently possible. Only about 6 percent of offenders rank in the top two levels; that is one in seventeen compared to one in five of the typical householders who also participated in the survey.<sup>4</sup>

The offenders' lack of education often sentences their children to repeat the cycle of low education, inadequate living skills, and criminal behavior. A study by the American Correctional Association found that 50 percent of juvenile offenders have had at least one parent incarcerated. Bamhill and Dressell estimate that children with incarcerated parents may be almost six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.- Colorado correctional libraries are working to change this intergeneration pattern through their innovative Read to the Children program. To implement the program at each facility, prison administrators review and determine that no procedure to be implemented is a threat to the security and order of the facility or the general public. Library staff is the first line of defense to ensure those security needs are met. As previously mentioned, the audiotapes are reviewed for content and messages. The content of the audiotape and the package as a whole are reviewed to prevent exchange of contraband, plans for escape, or other violations of rule.

As a group, offenders face obstacles when trying to keep in regular contact with friends and relatives. Maintaining contact with a minor child is even more difficult. Meetings may be infrequent because of distance or the primary caregiver's inability or unwillingness to visit the incarcerated parent. Contact may be indirect. Some prison visits must be conducted through plastic security walls. Visiting areas are loud, busy places with little privacy and limitations on physical interaction between offenders and visitors. Limitations also exist for the child and incarcerated parent who stay in contact through mail and telephone. For the offender, telephone conversations are conducted in open, public areas. Meanwhile, the child is dependent on the primary caregiver for permission and funding. Calls must be made collect, so the primary caregiver must be willing to pay. Maintaining a relationship through the mail is limited by the age of the child as well as the literacy levels of parent and child. It may also be limited by the funds available to the incarcerated parent to purchase writing supplies.

Meeting the needs of the offender, child, and caregiver is the "feel-good" component of the Read to the Children Program. This 2002 winner of Project of the Year from Colorado Association of Libraries provides the family members a method of communication and contact that all find to be comfortable. Read to the Children is currently conducted at eight facilities, and four additional facilities are preparing to implement the

program.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. One comment was simply, "Keep it up!" A little girl has a library of her father's books, and her mother now takes her to the library to get more books. Siblings in Aurora began reading books aloud to each other after reading along with their father's first recording.

Based on anecdotal evidence and survey results, Read to the Children has made positive changes far exceeding the original goals of the reading program.

Some of these changes include:

- \* Increased literacy skills of offenders: *Parents who could not read enrolled in the academic program at their facility, sought peer tutors, or improved their skills by choosing challenging material.*

- \* Increased literacy skills of children: *Children developed an increased interest and improved abilities in reading and writing.*

- \* Improved parenting skills: *Offenders sought information about and learned methods of parenting from staff, counselors, books, mass media, and discussion with their peers.*

- \* Strengthened parent-child relationship: *Made initial contact with the child or used the program to develop the relationship. The cooperative effort of reading a book proved non-threatening and positive, and helped develop the relationship further through conversations.*

- \* Enhanced relationship between parent and caregiver: *Relationships run the gamut from hostile to loving. Most caregivers found the program to be beneficial to the child, which encouraged them to view the incarcerated parent more positively. Caregivers asked the parent in prison for opinions about and assistance with parenting issues.*

- \* Developed interest and enthusiasm for reading: *Both offender and child became excited about books and reading. Experience evolved to comparisons, critiques and exploration of styles and genres.*

- \* Gave child a reader and library user as a role model: *Children emulated the parent's behavior of reading. Enclosures such as bookmarks and reading lists encouraged the children to read and fostered ongoing conversations.*

- \* Reduced offender idleness: *Time was spent in the positive activities of reading, researching, critiquing the literature, and contacting the child.*

- \* Improved offender behavior: *Offenders consciously strove to change their behavior, partly because in order to participate, they cannot have*

*been found guilty of any rule violation. More interestingly, though, they began to see themselves as parents who had to model correct behavior for the child.*

*\* Eased family reunification upon offender's release: Children who do not maintain contact with their incarcerated parent feel neglected and have difficulty relating to the parent. Parents who remain in contact during incarceration do not face this same stress upon rejoining the family.*

*\* Created a home environment supportive of reading and education: With few exceptions, most incarcerated parents' children do not include reading as a daily activity. Their primary caregivers are not consumers of books and reading materials and they are not library users.*

Corrections experts have found that an offender is less likely to return to criminal activity if there is a healthy family relationship in which s/he can obtain support and take on responsibility. Reports from current participant offenders indicate that their relationship with family members is improving, but no other data are available. Expansion of Read to the Children is planned to increase interaction with public libraries in order to encourage the child and primary caregiver to obtain library cards and use their local library. A letter of explanation, including benefits for the child and family, will be placed in the audiotape package.

Offenders often feel that they are unable to contribute to the well-being of the family. This small service will empower the offender to provide assistance to family members, improving self-esteem and his status in the family unit. It will allow the public library a means to reach its target audience, enhance visibility, and increase usage.

Cost to operate the Read to the Children Program is minimal. The only equipment required is a tape recorder, which is standard equipment in prison libraries. The audiotapes and envelopes are purchased by the facility, at a cost of about \$1.00 per reading. Nearly all of the books have been obtained by donation. The offender pays for the postage.

More books and additional funds to expand the

program are much needed and highly appreciated. Donations of cash and new and gently used children's books are facilitated by Sally Gillich, Institutions Acquisitions Consultant. She can be reached by telephone at 719-226-4520 or by e-mail at [gillich\\_s@cde.state.co.us](mailto:gillich_s@cde.state.co.us).

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>James J. Stephan and Jennifer C. Karberg. *Census of Federal and State Correctional Facilities, 2000*. NCJ198272, Washington, DC: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003. Full text PDF available online at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/csfcffOO.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Christopher J. Mumola *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. NCJ 182335, Washington, DC: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000. Also available online at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs>.

<sup>3</sup>Goodson, Swartz, and Millsap, 1990. In Ruth S. Nickse, *Family and Intergenerational Literacy Programs: An Update of the Noises of Literacy*. (Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1990). ERIC Document ID Reproduction Services No. ED 327 736.

<sup>4</sup>Karl O. Haigler, Caroline Harlow, Patricia O'Connor, and Anne Campbell. *Literacy Behind Prison Walls: Profiles of the prison Population from the National Adult Literacy Survey*. NCES 94-102 (Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Paula L. Dressel and Sandra K. Barnhill. *Three Generations at Risk: A Model Intergenerational Program for Families of Imprisoned Mothers*. (Atlanta: Aid to Imprisoned Mothers, 1991). CAL

*Diane Walden is Regional Librarian for the Four Mile Correctional Center in Canon City.*