

**Technology-Driven Literacy Programs as
a Tool for Re-connecting Incarcerated
Mothers and their Children:
Assessing their Need and Viability in
a Federal Prison**

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Abstract

Given the consequences of infrequent visitation for incarcerated mothers and their children, corrections officials have sought to identify innovative methods for improving mother-child contact. One example involves literacy programs relying on secure video and email communications. However, little is known about the incarcerated mothers and children these programs would serve, particularly the emotional and psychological issues that would need to be addressed to facilitate successful mother-child contacts. As part of a needs assessment for the development of a literacy-based program at the Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, Connecticut, researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with a non-probability convenience sample of 36 incarcerated mothers. Findings showed that the interviewees are relatively “high-functioning”, but do have significant problems related to traumatic experiences and mental health issues. Also, interviewees rarely see their children and would value a program that improves that connection. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for the development of such programs, particularly inmate concerns regarding family and caregiver resources and the need to address issues related to trauma and mental health.

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Introduction

The number of individuals incarcerated in jails and prisons in the United States has risen steadily throughout the 1990s. Although the United States prison and jail population is overwhelmingly male, the recent increase in incarceration rates for women has exceeded the increase for men. Women are also making up an increasing proportion of the reentry population. Female prisoners differ from their male counterparts in a number of important ways, but perhaps the greatest difference involves their role as primary caregivers for minor children. Research indicates that as many as 70 percent of female prisoners have a child under the age of 18, and that most incarcerated women are single mothers with more than one minor child (Pollock, 1998, 2004; Greenfield & Snell, 1999; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Covington, 2002).

Research also indicates that most incarcerated mothers do not receive regular visits from their children, and more than half do not receive any visits at all (Pollock, 2004). The reasons for few visits by children are numerous and individual but the most common barriers to regular visitation include restrictions of prison telephone privileges to collect calls only, distance (women's prisons may be far away from where the children reside), and lack of financial resources (Pollock, 2004). Alternatively, a poor relationship between the incarcerated mother and the child's custodial guardian can also result in limited visitation.

The consequences of mother-child separation can be severe. Dodge and Pogrebin (2001) found that being separated from their children induced stress and threatened the self-esteem of incarcerated mothers. Henriques (1996) states that visitation and

maintaining contact between the incarcerated mothers and their children are essential for the well-being of the mothers and their children and is also important for maintaining parental rights after incarceration. The resulting chasm between incarcerated mothers and their children has significant consequences for their eventual reentry to the community and their ability to re-engage with their children upon release.

The challenge for corrections officials involves developing programs and policies that foster mother-child contact and facilitate resumption of caregiver duties upon release, all within the context of maintaining a secure environment and overcoming obstacles to visitation. One promising strategy involves technology-driven literacy programs that permit secure contacts between mother and child via video or email transmissions. These programs seek to promote reading, improve reading levels among mothers and children, and enhance visitation without putting undue burden on the children's custodial guardians. Despite the promise of such programs, little is known about the mothers and children who are served, especially the emotional and psychological issues among both participants that may serve to inhibit program success.

In the context of these larger questions about incarcerated mother-child relationships and visitation, the Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation Center (CJREC), John Jay College of Criminal Justice, conducted face-to-face interviews with 36 female prisoners at the Federal Correctional Institution in Danbury, Connecticut. The interviews served as a needs assessment informing the development of a secure email-based literacy program linking incarcerated mothers and their children. More specifically, the interviews were intended to characterize the women in terms of their background, needs, risk factors, and children; information that would then be used to tailor the

program curriculum to fit the target population's needs. This paper describes the results of these interviews and considers their implications for the development of technology-driven literacy programs linking incarcerated mothers and their children.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Incarcerated Mothers and the Effects of Child Visitation

There is a small body of research suggesting that programs directed at improving the bond between incarcerated women and their children can be quite effective in achieving their objectives. Corrections officials in several states have experimented with innovative prison visitation programs to facilitate contact between incarcerated mothers and their minor children (Block, 1999; Morash & Schram, 2002; Hilliman, 2005). A number of studies have linked family ties and frequent prison visitation to reduced re-offending and drug use post-release (Courturier, 1995; Bloom, 1995; Block and Potthast, 1997). Pollock (2004) reported that as many as 80 percent of "connected" mothers committed no additional crimes after release from prison. Similarly, Martin (1997) found that frequent contact with children in a child-centered institution supports future reunification with children. Carlson (2001) examined a nursery program for women and their newborn infants in a Nebraska prison and found that 8 out of 11 women reported increased mother-child bonding and parenting skills, as well as decreases in misconduct reports while in prison and lower recidivism rates after release.

In November 1992, the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) and the Girl Scouts of America developed a program called *Girls Scouts Behind Bars* (GSBB), which has been replicated in several states nationwide (Moses, 1995). Block and Potthast (1998) analyzed visiting and interview data for the Maryland *Girl Scouts*

Behind Bars program and found evidence of enhanced mother-daughter visitation, when compared to matched prisoners who did not participate in the program. Approximately one fourth of the inmates reported that the GSBB visits improved their relationships and increased the frequency of their regular visits (Block and Potthast, 1998; Hilliman, 2005).

Snyder et al. (2001) interviewed 31 mothers who participated in the Mother-Child Visitation Program (MCVP) and 27 control subjects who were on the waiting-list for the program, but who did not participate during the study period. Snyder et al. (2001) found a moderate association between MCVP participation and the frequency of letters and/or phone calls from the children. Additionally, compared to mothers who did not participate, the MCVP mothers reported feeling less fearful about parenting and that their children were doing “better.”

Education and Literacy Programs in Prison

Educational programs for incarcerated offenders are known to have a positive effect on re-incarceration rates (Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002; Vacca, 2004). Literacy programs, vocational training, and parenting programs provide inmates with essential life skills and facilitate the development of comprehensive support systems (Gondles, 2002), both inside prison and later upon release in the communities. Research also suggests that many prisoners, especially women, actively seek out such programming while incarcerated. “Women in prison are amenable to treatment... women indicate that they appreciate all forms of programming and specifically ask for more programs that will help them overcome drug addiction, get a job upon release, and become better parents to their children” (Pollock, 2004: 202).

There have been numerous attempts to merge educational programs with the need to improve family connections. Several are described briefly below:

- *I Love You This Much*: Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Corrections; 164-page workbook that includes games, activities, sample letters and suggestions to help incarcerated men and women nurture their children from a distance and actively participate in parenting.
- *Parenting from the Inside: Maintaining the Bond*: Implemented at Danbury as part of the Parenting Program; includes sections on family literacy, parenting skills, and long-distance parenting.
- *The Read to Me Program*: implemented in Indiana state prisons for both men and women; the program seeks to break the cycle of incarceration and low literacy, educate parents to become their child's first teacher, instruct parents in the use of children's books to teach the children in their lives, and to make personal contacts with their children while incarcerated.
- *Long Distance Dads Program*: Pennsylvania Department of Corrections program which includes a "read to your children" program that allows prisoners to send their children books that they have read out loud and recorded on videotape. There is also a videoconferencing program for those who cannot afford to travel.
- *Family Works*: Osborne Association program run in New York state prisons. Children are brought to the prison to play and interact with their parents in a child-oriented room.

METHODOLOGY OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The Interviewees

Despite the positive research findings described above, the architects of the proposed literacy program at Danbury Federal Correctional Institution found little guidance in the literature with regard to program and curriculum development. In particular, program developers were concerned about the viability of the program, the characteristics of likely participants, and the potential for pre-existing problems – most notably emotional and psychological – among the women and children to impede the success of the program. In an effort to address these concerns, program developers asked

the authors to conduct in-person interviews with eligible prisoners to identify their primary needs and problems. The authors selected a non-probability convenience sample of 36 women meeting the following criteria:

1. having a child (or children) between the ages of 7 and 16;
2. having no disciplinary infractions that would preclude the interview;
3. having no mental illness severe enough to preclude the interview;
4. no current placement in maximum security housing or SHU;
5. having no immigration-related problems (i.e., facing deportation).

The prison education staff posted flyers around the institution asking for volunteers to participate in the interviews. Once a prisoner expressed interest, the prison staff confirmed that she met the eligibility criteria and scheduled her for an interview.

The Interview Form

The interview form included more than 80 open and closed-ended questions in the following general categories: education; work history; criminal history; trauma history; relationship with children (child); coping, social support, and self-esteem; and motivation for intervention. Interviews lasted from 30-70 minutes and were conducted by six female graduate students.

The interview form was supplemented with the SCID Patient Questionnaire (SSPQ), a computerized screening version of the Structured Interview for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) originally developed by Spitzer, Williams & Gibbon. This brief questionnaire does not produce definitive diagnoses. Rather, it identifies probable diagnoses and directs the clinician towards areas for further exploration. It screens for Axis I Major Mental Disorders (not Axis II Personality

Disorders). This instrument was administered to approximate in the most valid way possible (given realistic time constraints) the percentage of women with mental health diagnoses which have potential to impact upon their participation in the proposed program.

The Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, CJREC staff created a database in SPSS that recorded responses to all closed-ended questions. The responses to open-ended questions were content analyzed and classified into the most common categories of answers. The results of the SSPQ were printed out, attached to the hard copy interview form, and analyzed.

Limitations

Needs assessments, such as this project, are generally qualitative and detailed in nature with much less emphasis on quantitative, statistical analysis. The qualitative approach produces much more rich and informative data that can help program developers think comprehensively about their target population and how they can best serve their needs. Nevertheless, this type of approach suffers from a number of limitations that should be acknowledged, such as concerns over the voluntary nature of participation, the use of a new interview instrument (rather than a validated tool), and traditional problems with self-report and face-to-face interviewing. Moreover, the generalizability of findings is limited given the study site, a federal prison. However, given the objectives of the research, the interviews serve as a very useful mechanism for assessing the needs of women who may be served by this technology-driven mother-child literacy programs.

RESULTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The following is a summary of the key findings from each area of the assessment:

Demographics

- The interviewees range in age from 19-55, with a mean age of 35.
- Most of the interviewees are White (44%), nearly one-quarter are African American (22%), and 17% are Latina.
- 44 percent of the interviewees are single, never married and one-third are married (31%).

Interviewee Education

- As a group, the interviewees are well educated. Although, 50 percent admitted having dropped out of school, only 25 percent do not have a high school diploma or GED (75% do). Moreover, more than one-third (36%) have attended at least some college.
- Most interviewees are receiving education while in prison (67%).
- 89% report no problems with reading.
- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the importance of the following (1 being least important and 10 being most important): education, reading to their children, and having common interests with their children. All three were rated very high:
 - Importance of education- 9.8
 - Reading to their children- 10
 - Common interests with children- 9.7

Employment

- The vast majority of interviewees reported having legal employment prior to their incarceration (89%). Clerical/administrative occupations were the most frequently mentioned.
- 31% of the interviewees reported having had legal employment that was off the books. The occupations under this category were primarily babysitting, cleaning and/or bar/restaurant/food services jobs.
- More than half (53%) also reported income from illegal activities, most involving the sale of illegal drugs.

- About a third reported receiving some kind of job training while in prison, which varied in terms of the specific skills provided, ranging from landscaping to business education.
- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 their confidence in their ability to get a job after release. The mean level of confidence is 7.7. However, most interviewees recognized that there will be barriers to gaining employment, and 89 percent mentioned their criminal record as the most significant obstacle.

Prior Incarceration and Current Conviction Information

- Most interviewees (83%) have been incarcerated three or fewer times, including the current incarceration. For 69% this was their first incarceration.
- The average sentence length on their current conviction is 91 months or approximately 7.5 years.
- More than one-quarter of the interviews are serving time for a violent crime; 53% are serving time for a drug-related conviction.

Mental Health

- A substantial portion of the women (57%) acknowledged experiencing psychological symptoms associated with a trauma.
- Most of the women (77%) report problems with other anxiety or panic symptoms such as pounding heart, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, tightening in the chest, feelings of losing control. Over half reported obsessional symptoms or specific phobias.
- Approximately one quarter of the women experienced major depressive episodes or dysthymia (somewhat milder depression with longer duration).
- Over half of the sample met criteria for a past or current Substance Abuse Disorder (53%).
- Just under half of the women reported symptoms of serious mental illnesses like psychotic disorders or Bipolar Illness.
- 57% report receiving mental health treatment (therapy or medication) currently or in the past.

Trauma

- 72% of the interviewees reported having suffered some type of trauma. The most frequently cited type involved being in a violent romantic relationship (69%).¹
- One-third report experiencing physical harm as a child, and 39 percent report experiencing sexual abuse as a child.
- 14% report engaging in some form of self harm; 25% report at least one suicide attempt. The primary reasons cited for suicidal behavior and self-harm include depression and lack of self-confidence.

Children

- Most interviewees report having one or two children (75%). The average ages of the children are 13 and 12 (for those having a second child). The separation of the children from their mothers occurred at an early age –10 years old and below-, when the generation and strengthening of the bonds between a mother and a child are of particular importance to the healthy physical, mental and cognitive development of children. Being able to sustain this bond -or at least avoid its weakening- while incarcerated becomes these women's main concern.
- 37% indicate that their children are displaying behavioral problems, though very few have had any formal contact with the police or juvenile justice system. Anger management related issues were identified as the most common problem. ADD/ADHD and emotional problems were also mentioned.
- 70% of the children are in the physical custody of their biological father (39 percent) or maternal grandmother (31 percent).
- 69% of the interviewees reported some level of involvement by the father in terms of caring for the children (this ranges from just keeping in touch, to financial support, and to actually having custody of the children). They were also asked to rate their relationship with the children's father on a scale from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good). The average response given is 6.3.
- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 their relationship with the child's caregiver (1 being the worst and 10 being the best). Most reported a very strong relationship: mean is 8.4.
- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 their satisfaction level with how often they see their children (1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied). The mean satisfaction level is 3.9, suggesting that the interviewees are unhappy with the infrequency of contact with their children.

- Despite the strong relationship with caregivers, most interviewees do not see their children often. 30 percent said they have never seen their child while incarcerated, and 72 percent report infrequent visits (1-3 visits per year).

Coping

- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 their self-esteem (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest). Most women reported a high self-esteem. The mean is 7.0.
- Most women, whether they reported a high or low level, said their self-esteem has been affected by their being in prison; they expressed feelings of shame, regret and guilt for causing pain to their children.
- Interviewees were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the degree of control over their lives (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest). Most women reported a high level of control. The mean is 8.2.
- The interviewees mentioned several different methods of coping with things that distress or upset them. Of importance to the intervention, the most frequently mentioned technique was reading.
- With regard to coping with the stress of separation from children, the most frequent responses involved some type of direct communication with their children, either by phone, letter or a combination of the two.

Re-entry

- Inmates were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (very satisfied) their satisfaction level with the amount of social support they receive from people outside and inside prison. The mean level is 5.7 suggesting that most women are not satisfied.
- The majority cited finding a job and re-connecting with family as their biggest concerns when leaving prison. In addition, some inmates said they were concerned they would not be able to stay out of prison, and several cited concerns about returning to bad environments, where their safety - and that of their children – would be in question.
- The overwhelming majority of interviewees cited re-unification with children and family as the thing they most looked forward to upon release

Intervention

- Nearly all of the interviewees said they would be interested in a literacy program (97%).

- 89% said they would be willing to sign a contract outlining obligations to meet.
- 94% said they would be interested in a parental training program.

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews produced a wealth of information and provide program developers with an interesting snapshot of the backgrounds, characteristics and problems of likely participants and their children. There are several common themes emerging from these interviews that have specific implications for the implementation of the mother-child literacy program at Danbury. Though the generalizability of these specific findings is limited by the distinctiveness of the study site, the general issues that are raised in the interviews are relevant to other prisons and warrant consideration during planning and implementation of similar programs. Some of these common themes are discussed below.

1. The interviewees were relatively “high-functioning.”

Most graduated high school, had legitimate employment prior to their conviction, reported high levels of self-esteem and control over their lives. This is perhaps not surprising, given they are in a federal prison. There were a small number of individuals in this sample who exhibited problems in multiple areas of functioning and more severe problems, relative to the whole group. While they are small in numbers, the data provided by them are important to the development of this program if it is to generalize beyond Danbury FCI. Thus, curriculum developers will need to address the wide range of functional abilities (reading, education level, parenting strategies) in the women that make up the target population.

2. Diversity

The women were very diverse with regard to ethnicity. Similarly, the interests of participants ranged considerably, as did the ages of their children. The curriculum will need to be one that holds appeal for individuals of varying cultural and ethnic backgrounds. One way to do this is to intentionally incorporate stories/readings designed to increase exposure to many cultures.

3. The average time until release was much longer than expected in some cases.

Many inmates will spend a considerable amount of time incarcerated. This is particularly important to their children. Thus, programs of the type suggested here may need to work with women and their children for longer than anticipated to preserve and promote connections. This has implications for curriculums (both duration of curriculum generated) and for the resources of the programs (number of mentors, supplies required, etc.).

4. Despite their high level of functioning, many of the interviewees have significant problems in their lives.

Many have experienced trauma either as a child or in a violent romantic relationship as an adult. Most admit a problem with drugs, and most have had some sort of mental health treatment (indicating a mental health issue). Nearly 60% were receiving mental health treatment. A significant number of individuals had a serious mental illness that has potential to interfere with their participation in the program if and when they have an exacerbation of their illness. It is particularly important that programs anticipate this fact. Program staff will need training on how to address the issue with children if their mother is temporarily unable to participate. It is important that these children not be “lost” because of their mothers’ mental illnesses. Program or prison staff can facilitate psycho-

education and appropriate contact with parents in the event that the mother is temporarily unable to respond to the child.

5. There is a need for and interest in literacy programs.

Although most interviewees report a strong relationship with their children's caregiver, as a group they see their children infrequently (often because of distance and money constraints), and they are unhappy about this. In addition, interviewees were asked what they most looked forward to after release and they overwhelmingly cited reuniting with their family.

Several other things make this program necessary. Fully one quarter of the sample reported a suicide attempt. This is a startlingly high number. Suicide is known to have devastating effects on children. One of the factors shown to be a potent protective factor (i.e., protects people from killing themselves) is connection to family, particularly children. This interview data strongly supports the need to foster the relationships among incarcerated mothers and their children.

Also, over one third of mothers interviewed reported that their children were having behavioral problems and this intervention offers the opportunity to intervene in that arena. Mothers had fears about children becoming involved in illegal activities and hopes for their children involving higher education. This intervention has potential to help these children realize those dreams.

Conclusions

The mothers in this sample overwhelmingly supported the concept for this program. They believe in reading, they want stronger connections to their children, and they would be willing to participate in such a program. However, a number of potential

obstacles emerged during the interviews, including a lack of resources in the families, indicating that the program must have adequate resources to mount this intervention (i.e., program staff, computers), and the presence of emotional and psychological trauma. Given the composition of the prison population at Danbury, these obstacles and problems are likely to be more severe in other federal and state prisons.

Some of the other issues that arose during the interviews can be sufficiently addressed in the content of the curriculum, such as mental health issues (e.g., mommy is sick), separation and missing loved ones, grief (these families have high degrees of traumatic loss), and how to manage emotions like anger and sadness. Finally, readings should attempt to stimulate thinking about diversity, decision making, and problem-solving as well, given that many of the interviewees' children are displaying problem behaviors already.

In sum, technology-driven literacy programs seeking to connect incarcerated mothers and their children seem to hold great promise given prior research on mother-child attachment, the value of education and literacy programs, and the potential for technology to overcome the traditional barriers to visitation. Yet, the women and children served by these types of programs are likely to have diverse backgrounds with varying degrees of emotional, psychological and physical problems. Program success – measured through increased mother-child bonding, improved literacy levels, facilitated reentry, and improved behavior – will hinge a great deal on program developers' recognition of these issues, and their ability to respond to them when creating the program curriculum.

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Note

¹ In a recently published study on women in prison Bloom (2003) also reported high rates of trauma suffered by women prisoners.