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Reentry A New Model for Fathers

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Success Really Can Happen

“Only five men returned.” This was the statement that I was greeted with a few weeks ago as I met with facilitators across the state of Indiana. Sara Schroeder, the Parenting Coordinator for the Branchville Correctional Facility in Branchville Indiana, began to explain. For three years she has been running a fathering program to help inmate dads reunite with their children and families. After following the 186 men for three years after their release only five have returned back into the system. Of those five, three were returned for minor offenses and two were coming back for long-term stays. However five out of 186 is a great recidivism rate when in comparison usually seventy percent of the men released from incarceration return within one to three years.

Another story was told in these encounters. The second story came about when a key employee for the Indiana Department of Corrections (DOC) was having the internet installed in her home. She happened to have copies of NFI's program for incarcerated fathers out on her table. Upon seeing them, Jake Barrett¹, the gentleman installing the internet, shared with her that three

years ago he had gone through the program and that it completely changed his life!

Jake served eighteen months at the Plainfield Correctional Facilities in Plainfield, Indiana. Like most inmates, he was a father who was disconnected from his children. However, at one point during his incarceration, Jake made the decision to enroll in NFI's incarcerated fathers program.

During the twelve sessions of the program, Jake was inspired to commit his life to being a better father to his two children. By his own admission he had not really spent any time with his children. Before he could see them again, he had to convince their mother that he had not only the commitment, but also the skill to be a good father. NFI's incarcerated fathers program helped him do just that and after his release from prison in September 2004, the first thing Jake did was to go see his kids.

Today, Jake says that he spends quality time with his children every day of the week. From helping with homework assignments to planning weekly activities with his children, Jake credits NFI's Incarcerated Fathers Program with helping him turn his life around and get his priorities straight – namely being a good father and role model. The importance of Jake's involvement can't be overstated since children of incarcerated parents are

seven times more likely to become involved in criminal activity.

When asked what he liked best about NFI's program for incarcerated fathers, Jake replied, *“It gave me and the other guys in the program an opportunity to discuss how important our kids were in our lives. I learned that I wasn't the only guy there who felt that way.”* Jake went on, *“The program helped me understand how to be a better father. All the dads in the group tried to learn from each other and support each other when we made mistakes. I would do anything to help promote this program. It changed my life and the life of my kids!”*

Jake is now a supervisor for a local cable company. But even more importantly, he is an involved, responsible, and committed father.

Profile of an Incarcerated Father

Recent studies have defined men that are incarcerated. Studies show that thirty five to forty five percent of all male inmates are fathers. Twenty five to thirty five is the average age of these fathers. Thirty percent are married and twenty percent have been divorced. On average they have an eleventh grade education and they read at a sixth grade level.

Nearly half of all imprisoned parents are black and about a quarter are white.

Over sixty percent are incarcerated more than one hundred miles away from their family and the average sentence is between eight and one hundred months. Over half are incarcerated for violent offenses or drug trafficking. Violent criminals are overwhelmingly males who grew up without fathers², including up to sixty percent of rapists, seventy two percent of adolescents charged with murder, and seventy percent of juveniles in state reform institutions³.

Ninety percent of all inmates will be released and seventy percent come back to the community in which they have committed the crime that sent them to prison. There are 600,000 men released from prison every year – or about 1,600 a day. Seventy percent of men released will be rearrested within three years.

A Model of Reentry for Incarcerated Fathers

InsideOut Dad™

The challenge of fathering from behind bars is clear. Physical barriers, long absences, and deep family wounds make it difficult for men to fulfill their responsibilities to their children while incarcerated. Upon release from prison fathers can have a difficult time readjusting to life with family and community. There is evidence that connecting fathers to their children and families reduces recidivism and helps to end the intergenerational cycle of incarceration that has come to plague many communities. Expanding upon its highly successful Long Distance Dads™ program (which runs in prisons in 25 states), NFI has recently launched the InsideOut Dad™ curriculum. It is a comprehensive program that not only helps men be better fathers while in prison, but provides them with guidance on successfully reentering society upon release. InsideOut Dad™ can be offered in both prisons and in community-based settings that work with reentering prisoners.

Short-Term Facilities

Many men on their journey to release will spend some time in a short-term stay facility. This provides an opportunity to empower men with the knowledge and skills they need to connect with their

children and families in a healthy way. This time before release can be a “defining moment” for the offender as he decides whether he will choose a new path for his future. Helping offenders reconnect with their children can be the deciding factor whether to commit another crime. The National Fatherhood Initiative Reentry brochure as well as the Reentry module in the InsideOut Dad™ materials can help the inmate develop a reentry plan. The InsideOut Dad™ curricula can also be adapted to short-term facilities.

Another aspect of preparing for reunification is helping fathers learn the basic skills necessary to be an involved, committed, and responsible father. The National Fatherhood Initiative’s Doctor Dad™ workshop is a soft approach for newly involved fathers to get the basic skills necessary to meet the needs of their children. Doctor Dad™ is a groundbreaking workshop to help a father care for the health and safety of his child. Fathers learn how to use basic medical knowledge to provide compassionate care, enabling them to handle the majority of medical situations that may arise as their children grow. Certified healthcare professionals, health educators, or other qualified persons teach this interactive workshop in four sessions, each lasting two to three hours. Doctor Dad™ delivers an interactive, structured learning experience. The workshop sessions include: 1) The Well Child, 2) The Sick Child, 3) The Injured Child, and 4) The Safe Child.

Perhaps the most important benefit of Doctor Dad™ is that it empowers fathers to become actively involved in their child’s healthcare, enabling the child to flourish and set a course for a healthy future. In addition, there is a valuable resource entitled the Dad Pack™ (a uniquely packaged information kit to give fathers practical skills to be a better dad). This kit includes information on “10 ways to be a better dad, how to help your child do well in school, and 12 ways to balance work and family as well as an interactive CD called “directions for dads.” It can be given to inmates in preparation for release.

Community After Release

This is the broadest area and the one that provides the most opportunities to

reach fathers. However, the vast network of social services programs run both publicly and privately lag in the amount of assistance they provide for men and fathers as compared to mothers and children. One area in which the National Fatherhood Initiative has had success is working through faith communities. The faith community provides a great opportunity to reach fathers in an environment that is already communicating messages about the importance of fatherhood and family. National Fatherhood Initiative’s 24/7 Dad™ Christian-based curriculum is designed to give churches an easily-implemented and customizable program to begin reaching men specifically around fatherhood, marriage, and family issues.

Conclusion

As social science research solidified the argument that children need their dads, it was no longer a question of “should fatherhood programming be carried out” but “how should it be carried out.” In the last decade, various organizations have formed to address the array of issues facing fathers. National Fatherhood Initiative has taken a broad approach to renewing fatherhood by working in and with every sector of society to tackle the specific issues that hinder the ability of fathers to be the best dads they can be. By providing state-of-the-art resources for both individual fathers and those who support them, NFI is confident that it will carry out its mission of improving the well being of children by increasing the proportion growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers and creating thousands more success stories. ✪

- 1 The name of the ex-inmate in this article was changed for confidentiality purposes.
- 2 Brenner, Eric. *Fathers in Prison: A review of the data*. NCOFF Brief. Philadelphia: National Center on Fathers and Families, University of Pennsylvania, 1998.
- 3 Beck, Allen, Susan Kline, and Lawrence Greenfield. *Survey of Youth in Custody*, 1987. U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Washington DC; GPO, September 1988.