Perceptions of Parenting Practices of Incarcerated Fathers who have Received Parent Training and those who have not in a Federal Prison in a Northeastern Urban Community in the USA.

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Abstract

The impact of incarceration on the parent-child relationship could have devastating effects on the life of the parent and the child. The federal prison system mandates parenting programs for inmates and many incarcerated fathers struggle to develop or maintain positive relationships with their children. This study compared the perceptions of parenting practices between inmates that completed parenting training with those that had not been trained. Parenting practices were also investigated across ethnic groups and levels of educational achievement. Dimensions studied included discipline, communication, financial literacy, respect, and the effect of incarceration on the child. A pre test, post test comparison showed a significant gain in the mean scores of participants in the dimensions of parent-child interactions and discipline. A discussion group after the training identified intergenerational incarceration, children of inmates, parenting during re entry, and the pain of an incarcerated parent as topics to be implemented in prison based parenting programs.

Introduction

Children of incarcerated parents faced a higher risk of experiencing poverty as well as social, emotional, and learning problems (Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002). Some young children have experienced despair in addition to developmental issues (Magaletta & Herbst, 2001). Many children have experienced the trauma of sudden separation from their sole caregiver. As a result, most of them were vulnerable to feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, and guilt. The possibilities of behavioral consequences were severe. Absent positive intervention, emotional withdrawal, failure in school, delinquency and the risk of intergenerational incarceration were a few negative outcomes the child of a parent in prison encountered (Seymour, 1998). Educators and members of the community need to understand the impact incarceration has on the family. With almost a quarter of a million parents in prison, more research is needed to assist these parents with parenting skills to actively parent while incarcerated thru the reentry phase back to the community. This study provides incarcerated fathers with parenting skills that could be utilized during and after incarceration.

Many incarcerated fathers attempted to fulfill a parenting role against tremendous odds. Whether most prisoners wanted to carry out traditional parental roles they were not in a position to do so (Hairston, 1998). Unique challenges that imprisonment presented for parents needed to be recognized so that the maintenance of parent-child bonds could be promoted during incarceration (Hairston, 1998).

The parenting role and responsibilities of incarcerated fathers were impacted by criminal justice policies and practices (Johnston, 1995). Men’s family obligations have not been a priority for correctional institutions (Johnston, 1995). Fathers in prison have not been a major concern of community organizations that were involved with family life and children’s well being (Hairston, 1998). Hairston (1998) viewed prison as a major obstacle to the maintenance of family ties.

The number of children with a parent in prison doubled from 10 in every 1,000 children in 1986 to 20 in every 1,000 children by 1997 (Eddy & Reid, 2003). At midyear of 2007, the nation’s prisons held approximately 744,200 fathers in prison in the United States. Children benefited from having fathers involved in their lives; they developed better peer relationships, they experienced more success at school and in their careers. Father involvement reduced certain risks such as poverty, trouble with the law, and early sexual activities (Anderson, Kohler & Letiecq, 2002).

The Federal Bureau of Prisons required institutions’ education departments to provide a parenting program for inmates. The purpose of the parenting program was to assist parents with tools that fostered positive relationships, family values, mutual support, and nurturing, which may have been sustained after release (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, 5355.03, 1995). On a voluntary basis, inmates signed up to enroll in the parenting program. The material used to conduct the program was dependent upon the instructors’ preference. Parenting program lessons may have entailed topics concerning nutrition, discipline, and self esteem. The completion requirement varied between each institution.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to compare the perceptions of parenting practices of incarcerated fathers who received parent training to those who had not in a federal prison in a northeastern urban community in New York. Specific parenting practices were assessed by identifying how they were rated by incarcerated males using a five point Likert Scale. This study also examined how these practices affected the parent-child relationship after participating in the training program.

The components of the training program included: communication, discipline, financial literacy, respect, and the effects of incarceration. Further, this study investigated the relationship of the parenting practices to ethnicity, educational attainment, and the fathers relationship with the child/children’s’ mother(s).

Methodology

This study took place in a federal prison in a northeastern urban community in New York. The inmates were housed in a dormitory or in prison cells with two bunk beds. Each housing unit housed up to 122 inmates. The prison population consisted of male and female offenders. Male and female offenders were not housed on the same units and they were not permitted to participate in programs together. This study included White, Black, Asian and Hispanic descent inmates. The study focused on male parents. The parenting training was held in a room decorated with pictures relative to the topic. A musician played an organ during independent and small group actives and at the beginning and end of each class.

The study consisted of two groups, one treatment group and one control group. All of the groups were administered a pre test and post test survey. There was a five week period between the pre and post tests. A mixed methodology was employed. To garner quantitative data a pre and post test survey using a five point Likert Scale was administered to assess how incarcerated fathers rated specific parenting practices using, strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat agree, agree, or strongly agree. To garner qualitative data a panel of four participants who successfully completed the program was interviewed.

After receiving responses from the survey, A factor analysis was performed to obtain a clearer distinction among the initial dimensions. The refined dimensions in this study are parent-child interactions, discipline and financial literacy.

The parenting training program included topics from “The Role of a Father” curriculum, which focused on five dimensions; discipline, communication, financial literacy, respect and the effects of incarceration. Specific parenting practices were assessed by identifying how they were rated by incarcerated males using a 43 item Likert Scale survey and two open-ended questions was utilized for qualitative support.

There were 60 respondents in the study, 30 participants and 30 non participants.

Methodology

Analysis of the data was presented through reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, *t* tests and match pair.

The findings in this study indicated that the respondents had high levels of education; the majority of the participants (37%) and non participants (63%) had attended or graduated from college. The results of the pre test showed participants and non participants had high levels of agreement on all three parenting dimensions; parent-child interactions, discipline and financial literacy. The pre test results also indicated participants had a statistically significant difference on the financial literacy dimension. The post test results indicated both groups recorded higher means on all dimensionsin comparison to the pre test mean scores. Participants had significant differences in parent-child interactions and financial literacy. Non participants had a significant difference in parent-child interactions. The results of the match pair showed a statistically significant gain on the participants mean scores for the parent-child interactions and discipline dimension when comparing the pre-test and the post-test.

Analysis of the qualitative questions indicated it may be beneficial for prison based parenting programs to include topics such as communication, the role of a father, knowledge of children, and re-entry and parenting. The panelist identified intergenerational incarceration, parenting and the prison system and understanding the law as topics that could be included in future parenting programs.

Incorporating topics into a parenting curriculum such as parent-child interactions, discipline and financial literacy may assist incarcerated fathers with strategies to enhance the parent-child relationship regardless of prison regulations. Some incarcerated fathers with high levels of parenting skills need strategies to maintain a relationship while imprisoned. Other incarcerated fathers may need to be taught parenting skills and strategies to develop a relationship with their children.

Educational Importance of this study

In the federal prison system there are thousands of incarcerated fathers. The impact of incarceration on the parent-child relationship could have devastating effects (behavioral, social, and psychological) for a lifetime for both the parent and the child. Even with the mandate of parenting programs in the federal prison system, many incarcerated fathers have limited parenting skills and others may not know how to actively parent from prison to maintain or develop a positive relationship with their child.

The purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of parenting practices of incarcerated fathers who have received parent training to those who have not in a federal prison in a northeastern urban community in New York. Furthermore, this study investigated the relationship of the parenting practices to ethnicity, educational attainment, and the fathers’ relationship with the child/children’s mother(s).

The findings of this study revealed the types of parenting practices utilized by incarcerated fathers. This study can encourage Parenting Program Coordinators to understand the needs of incarcerated fathers in the criminal justice system. In order to provide incarcerated fathers with appropriate strategies to enhance their relationship with their child, Parenting Coordinators must understand the restrictions and the barriers these parents will encounter. Parenting Coordinators can obtain knowledge through experiences with incarcerated parents as well as by participating in training relative to the impact incarceration has on the parent, the child and other family members.

Many of the fathers who participated in the study had children older than the age of 18. Parenting Coordinators could utilize the dimensions examined in this study to develop a program to address the needs of parents with adult children over the age of 18. Utilizing the strategies taught in “The Role of a Father” may enhance their relationships with their older children.

Incarcerated fathers must identify the effects their incarceration has on their children. The results of the study indicate that incarcerated parents could benefit from a parenting training while imprisoned. These fathers must be willing to utilize various strategies to maintain a relationship. Being an active parent while incarcerated may make the fathers feel comfortable to make decisions when they return home. The program encouraged fathers to communicate via telephone and letters, to use positive discipline techniques, and to identify ways to teach respect and financial literacy skills. In addition, creating a re-entry family plan with their loved ones may ease the tension of the unknown stressors at home.

This study identified the types of interactions incarcerated fathers had with their children. The parenting training provided incarcerated fathers with activities to enhance the types of interactions they had with their child while incarcerated. Using various types of communication activities such as; writing wish lists, feeling letters, sending and receiving puzzles to complete together via mail, may keep the child and the parent actively communicating. The importance of this program addressing the types of communication techniques used with incarcerated parents was supported by the findings of the study.

Correctional administrators could implement a Release Preparation Family Program. This program could provide incentives similar to the Residential Drug Abuse Program (RDAP) for incarcerated parents (early release up to twelve months). Incarcerated parents will be encouraged to be committed to completing the program at the designated facility, while residing in a Residential Re-entry Center (RRC) or on home confinement. Follow up treatment will be required with the child or children and with the mother or caregiver. The parent will also be required to meet their financial responsibilities to the Department of Justice and child support services. A violation of the Release Preparation Family Program policy will result in a removal from the program.

Implementing a family program has the potential to positively influence the life of the incarcerated father, their children, and the mother or the caregiver. Incarceration affects the whole family. Providing these families with an opportunity to enhance their parenting skills as well as the family relationships may reduce the chances of re-entry and intergenerational incarceration.

References