



LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Visitation Discussion

IMPROVING PRISON VISITATIONS

On November 14th, 2013, as a part of the *Unbarred: Strengthening Families Affected by Incarceration* Lessons from the Field event held by the Extension Children, Youth and Family Consortium (<http://www1.extension.umn.edu/family/cyfc/>), a discussion was held about the importance of visitation in promoting positive relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. Participants were given the current Minnesota Department of Corrections policies on visitation, and were asked to brainstorm ideas to better enhance positive relationships between parents and their children of 3 distinct age groups (Birth - 3 year olds, 4 to 10 year olds and 11 to 17 year olds).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Birth to 3 year olds

In general, the birth to 3 year old group focused on the importance of the incarcerated parent feeling connected to the child through holding and touch. However, it was noted that children of certain ages may not be comfortable with being held by someone with whom they are less familiar. The group reflected that sometimes fathers especially may struggle to interact with young children, so some ideas of activities were recommended:

- Over a baby's nap time, the incarcerated parent could hold baby when child is not squirming.
- Play peek-a-boo, finger games, sing songs

4 to 10 year olds

Space was a major theme in the group discussing 4 to 10 year olds. Providing a warmer more inviting space would be beneficial as current visitation rooms are more likely to cause anxiety and be scary to young children. It was also suggested that perhaps there could be a separate visiting space for incarcerated parents and their families to visit that had more space for play.

Alternatively, using the same visitation space but moving chairs to allow for families to interact and play together on the floor was suggested. There were also recommendations for how to increase parent and child interactions:

- A staff person present in the visitation room who could serve as a liaison or parent coach to intervene when parents struggle with keeping conversations or games going, or when children are becoming distressed to help prevent meltdowns
- Story telling with puppets as an activity
- Developmentally appropriate boxes for different age ranges full of games/books and activities that could be checked out upon arrival.

11 to 17 year olds

The group discussing the 11 to 17 year old age range struggled to come up with activities that 11 to 17 year old youth would find enjoyable. Recommendations included:

- A list of possible conversation starters, perhaps in the form of a poster on the wall that parents could use to help engage the teen in conversation.
- Having a “book club” where both parent and child could have access to the same book to talk about during visits.
- Games involving playing cards, or knowledge games (e.g. name all the state capitols) might also engage children of other ages who may also be visiting the parent as well.
- In the case of video visitation, perhaps children and parents could both have access to the same online computer game and could play together during visitation.

CHALLENGES

Groups noted that there were distinct challenges due to the rules of visitation (e.g. limited physical contact, limits to what can be brought into the facility, etc). Overall, there was understanding of the need for rules and regulations to govern visitation to maintain security, but there was also a desire to increase positive relationships between incarcerated parents and their children through creative solutions.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

There were many recommendations that were similar across groups. Most were very cost effective:

- **A liaison or staff person** who would assist parents and children in games, activities, or conversation starters to better enhance visitation experiences. This person could be a trained volunteer or intern, thus minimizing cost to DOC.
- **Painting the visitation rooms** to make them more warm and welcoming would be a minimal cost to easily enhance children’s comfort and experience.
- **Adding games or books** to visitation rooms that offer a range of age appropriate options so parents and children can interact effectively during their visitation times. Perhaps these could come from donations or book drives.

The main concern across the group was that the current visitation structure is not very conducive to supporting children’s relationships with their incarcerated parents. Often visits are stressful and unfulfilling. The group challenged that more could be done to improve the interaction between children and their parent to build stronger relationships.