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NRFC Tips for Fatherhood Professionals

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FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING IN CORRECTIONAL SETTINGS: SELECTING A CURRICULUM

A curriculum that is relevant, timely, and realistic is essential for helping you structure your work with fathers in correctional settings. However, because of the variety of curricula available to fatherhood program practitioners, choosing an appropriate curriculum for the fathers you serve can seem overwhelming. For professionals working with dads in prisons, jails, halfway houses, and other correctional settings, investing time to identify and use an effective curriculum will produce tremendous long-term benefits both for participants and the program.

Lesson Plan for Real Life

Almost 2.3 million people are in U.S. jails and prisons and more than 798,000 are on parole. Nearly 7.5 million children have a parent who is in prison, in jail, or under correctional supervision, and more than 90 percent of these parents are fathers. Minority children are disproportionately affected by father imprisonment. In state prisons, 42 percent of fathers are African-American, and African-American children are six and one half times more likely to have a parent in prison than are white children (6.7% versus 0.9%).ⁱ

In a prison-based fatherhood program, the average participant is likely to be in his late 20s or early 30s; divorced, separated, or never married; a drug user in the month before arrest; and a high school dropout. Fathers in state prison are likely to be slightly younger and less likely to be married, or to have ever been married, than fathers in federal prison.ⁱⁱ A recent report indicates that only 23 percent of state prisoners are married, but many are involved in intimate or co-parenting relationships.ⁱⁱⁱ

Forty-four percent of fathers in state prisons and 55 percent in federal prisons reported living with at least one of their minor children prior to imprisonment, and a slightly lower percentage (36% in state prisons and 47% in federal prisons) had lived with their children in the month prior to their arrest.^{iv} Consequently, fatherhood practitioners can help some fathers build on existing father-child relationships and help others find ways to create new bonds with their children and families.

Experienced practitioners have noted that inmates frequently fantasize about what life will be like on the outside and may be unwilling to face the real problems. Many develop an unrealistic view of what home life will be like when they return and are often unaware, or even unwilling to admit, just how much prison life has affected them. The impact of “institutionalization” can be significant and may make the transition home very difficult.

By focusing on cognitive readjustment through awareness and training, fatherhood programming can strengthen family and community connections and have a major impact on both child and father well-being, as well as reduce the chance of recidivism for participants. Evaluations of parenting programs in prison reveal that “inmates involved in such programs indicate improved attitudes about the importance of fatherhood, increased parenting skills, and more frequent contact with their children.”^v However, this work is not easy; having the right tools—including an effective curriculum—to guide a process of self-reflection and growth can make the difference between a successful and non-successful program.

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Selection to Suit Needs

A variety of curricula are available for use in diverse settings with fathers. These curricula vary in the content covered, delivery methods, amount of training provided on how to implement the curriculum, level of technical assistance provided by the curriculum developer, extent to which the program is research-based, and whether they have been evaluated to determine effectiveness. Choosing among fatherhood curricula requires careful examination of content and context to respond to the needs of the fathers you plan to serve, as well as the availability and level of training and ongoing technical assistance on the implementation of the curriculum. Aim to select a curriculum that includes content that matches the needs of as many fathers as possible, offers training options, and provides ongoing technical assistance. You also should try to select a curriculum that has been evaluated at some level, through either a process or outcome evaluation, or both.

Key decision makers and staff who will implement the fatherhood program should be involved in the review and selection of a curriculum to help ensure broad-based ownership of the decision, which is vital for long-term commitment to the curriculum and program.

Once the curriculum is selected, recruit competent and knowledgeable facilitators who can connect with program participants and guide the learning process in a skillful, meaningful way. Encourage all curriculum facilitators to receive training in the chosen curriculum and/or in general group facilitation skills.

Choose a Curriculum in Six Steps

- **Step 1:** Identify the target population for the curriculum
- **Step 2:** Identify the personal development needs (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) of the target population; for example, through individual interviews, focus groups, a survey of fathers, or by talking with correctional staff and others working in the facility
- **Step 3:** Identify required curriculum content, based on Steps 1 and 2
- **Step 4:** Research available curricula
- **Step 5:** Assess available curricula using the Curriculum Selection Guidelines that follow (pages 3-4)
- **Step 6:** Select a curriculum that matches program goals and needs identified in Steps 1, 2, and 3

Curriculum Selection Guidelines	Yes/No
Is the curriculum designed specifically for fathers? (rather than for parents in general)	
Is the curriculum designed specifically for work with fathers in a correctional and/or re-entry setting?	
Was the curriculum designed by a team of experts with input from practitioners?	
Is the curriculum material research- or theory-based?	
Does the curriculum include the history of and theories underlying the development of the curriculum?	
Is the curriculum written at a literacy level that can be understood by fathers with limited literacy skills?	
Has the curriculum been field tested and evaluated?	
Does the curriculum include material that is culturally relevant to the target population?	
Does the curriculum include material that helps participants explore and understand the impact of their past experiences and behavior on their children?	
Does the curriculum include material that helps fathers get in touch with and identify their emotions and feelings?	
Does the curriculum include material that addresses the impact of culture on fathering?	
Does the curriculum include material that encourages and instructs fathers in developing personal and family goals?	
Does the curriculum include material that explores definitions of masculinity and ways of relating to women and children?	
Does the curriculum include content on developing and maintaining healthy relationships with children?	
Does the curriculum include content on effective discipline of children?	
Does the curriculum include content on child development and behavior?	
Does the curriculum include content on developing and maintaining healthy relationships with mothers/women?	
Does the curriculum include content on the importance and value of a healthy marriage as the ideal context in which to raise children?	
Does the curriculum include content on domestic violence? (including awareness, prevention, or intervention)	
Does the curriculum offer sample/complimentary portions of the curriculum for review prior to purchase?	
Does the curriculum offer easily accessible technical assistance on implementing the curriculum?	
Does the curriculum offer technical assistance throughout the year? (including notification about updates or additions)	
Does the curriculum include content that guides facilitators on how to implement the curriculum?	
Does the curriculum include easy-to-follow procedures for planning and conducting group sessions?	
Does the curriculum include a handbook, workbook, or other tools that fathers can use during their participation and that they can keep and refer to after their participation?	
Does the curriculum include evaluation tools specific to the curriculum? (such as for measuring change among fathers and gaining facilitator feedback on curriculum effectiveness)	
Does the curriculum include information on recruiting fathers and sustaining their participation in the program?	
Does the curriculum include tips for setting up and facilitating groups in a correctional setting?	

Curriculum Selection Guidelines	Yes/No
Does the curriculum offer formal training (in person or on the Web) for facilitators on how to implement the curriculum, with an emphasis on preparing facilitators to use the materials in a correctional setting?	
Does the curriculum include interactive exercises or tools that engage a variety of senses in the learning process?	
Does the curriculum include tools and ideas to help incarcerated fathers develop and maintain their parenting and relationship skills?	
Does the curriculum provide opportunities to practice skills through activities, such as role plays, that allow fathers to fully understand their own feelings and those of their children?	
Does the curriculum prepare fathers for community re-entry?	
Does the curriculum include content that addresses family reunification issues and provides fathers an opportunity to understand and practice ways to resolve anticipated problems?	
Does the curriculum include content that encourages fathers to reconnect and/or stay connected to their children in safe ways?	
Does the curriculum include content that emphasizes how the activities will benefit participants' children?	
Does the curriculum include content that engages dads in hands-on activities to teach skills and attitudes?	
Does the curriculum include content to show fathers how they can buffer their children from stress, teach them values, and help them interpret the world?	
Does the curriculum acknowledge the impact of institutionalization and help fathers prepare for the transition home?	
Does each session of the curriculum include a clear statement of goals and objectives indicating the major learning concepts that are expected to be covered in that session?	
Does the curriculum build in time at the beginning of each session for fathers to share any lessons learned or obstacles encountered?	
Does each session of the curriculum end with an opportunity for fathers to reflect on lessons learned and messages they can apply?	
Does the curriculum require fathers to review major concepts in some form of homework that they complete on their own time?	
Does the curriculum include information on child support issues and policies?	

ⁱ Herman-Stahl, M., Kan, M. L., & McKay, T. (2008). *Incarceration and the family: A review of research and promising approaches for serving fathers and families*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of the Secretary, and Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Mumola, C. J. (2000). *Incarcerated parents and their children*, Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

ⁱⁱ Mumola (2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay (2008).

^{iv} Mumola (2000).

^v Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay (2008), p. SP-2.