

## **Incarcerated Mothers and Parenting**

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*This paper describes as a primary prevention strategy, a parent-education program aimed at enhancing the parenting skills and knowledge of incarcerated women (the majority of whom were mothers). Data are presented which describe changes in program participants' self-evaluations, parenting attitudes, and expectations of children. Upon completing of the parenting program, few differences were observed for the various pre- and post-test measures. Specifically, the analysis indicated that participants' self-esteem improved slightly but that participants appeared to regress in such parenting attitudes as beliefs in the use of corporal punishment as a means of discipline. The need for further examination of the area of parenting attitudes and practices of incarcerated mothers is underscored.*

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**KEY WORDS:** incarcerated mothers; parenting skills; parent training; child abuse.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Incarcerated mothers would seem to be a logical target for primary prevention efforts aimed at enhancing parenting skills. The notion that incarcerated mothers may be an "at-risk" group is derived partly from the literature. These findings, which are scanty and unsystematic, reveal that a large proportion of adults involved in criminal behavior were abused and neglected as children and that individuals having childhood histories of child abuse and neglect are likely to abuse and neglect their own offspring (Alfaro, 1986; Garbarino and Gronginger, 1983; Len, 1978; Velimesis, 1975). These data

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imply that aberrant nurturing and parenting received during the formative years set the stage for subsequent personal and parenting problems. This notion is also supported by the limited research indicating that a prison environment has a negative impact on family relationships and the parenting process (Hairston and Lockett, 1985).

Imprisonment is destructive to the parenting role. Not only does it sever the parent-child relationship, but it also fosters dependency, a behavior un-conductive to the development of responsibility for one's children (Baunach, 1979). For many mothers, the separation from their children as akin to a loss resulting from divorce or death, and this loss necessitates difficult adjustments (Baunach, 1979).

Related to the sense of loss is the incarcerated mother's overall fear of inadequacy as a mother and her fear of being unable to readjust to living with her children upon release. These feelings of inadequacy and the inability to readjust are supported by research on incarcerated mothers and their children (Chapman, 1980). In one study, 138 incarcerated mothers were questioned about problems they thought they would have in readjusting to living with their children (Baunach, 1979). The results revealed that 64% of the mothers thought that they would have readjustment difficulties. Specifically, these mothers had reservations about their adequacy as parents. One-third of the mothers mentioned that they would have problems with discipline. In addition, they noted that they lacked confidence in their abilities to constructively handle discipline problems.

Despite the concerns these women have about their readjustment to the parenting role, they want parental responsibilities; and they do resume them (Baunach, 1979; Chapman, 1980). In resuming these responsibilities, they find that in addition to juggling the needs of their children, they have the responsibilities of: (1) locating stable employment, (2) meeting the requirements of the criminal justice system, and often, (3) resuming the sole financial and emotional care of their children (Glick and Neto, 1977; Governmental Accounting Office, 1979). Such a situation is stressful even for mothers who are without the stigma of incarceration. However, for a mother who has such a stigma, this situation can be highly stressful and frustrating. Moreover, the stresses and frustrations associated with the social and family environment are known to contribute to child abuse and neglect.

Previous research has shown that parent education which is aimed at enhancing parental childrearing capabilities and knowledge appears to be effective in improving parenting skills (Health, Education and Welfare, 1977; Rodrigues, 1983). Such an intervention was presently developed and implemented for a group of incarcerated mothers; this paper presents a description of the program and the results of an evaluation conducted to determine its efficacy.

## THE PARENT EDUCATION PROJECT

The Parent Education Project was implemented in 1984 by the PROGRAM for Female Offenders, Inc., in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The goal of this nonprofit organization is to deter its clients' return to criminal behavior and to reintegrate the offender into society. The curriculum for the parenting project was developed and field tested by the Community Mental Health/Mental Retardation Center of St. Francis Hospital. Entitled, "The Education for Parenthood Curriculum," its primary objective is the enhancement of parents' capacities to raise physically and emotionally healthy children. The rationale underlying the "Curriculum" is that parents devote little thought to the role, goals, and styles of parenting. As a result, parental behavior is more often the product of modeling and responding to the perceived expectations of others than the result of individual self-determination. Further, parents pay little attention to factors which determine behavior. Therefore, the initial objective of the "Curriculum" is to foster an individual's awareness of her parenting style and of the significant factors underlying its development. In using the "Curriculum," care is taken not to make judgments concerning an individual's family patterns or to explore areas in such a way as to arouse participants' resentment. However, it is recognized that awareness of parenting style alone will not be sufficient to achieve the overall objective. That is, although mothers may possess a defined parenting style, this style may not be conducive to good parenting.

To meet the objectives of the "Curriculum," ideas are drawn from many sources and presented in four main sections. These sections are: "Needs," "Emotional Involvement," the "Development of Individual Personalities within a Family Setting," and "Self-Esteem." The "Needs" section, which is drawn from Maslow's (1954) "Needs Hierarchy," presents needs as motivators of behavior and explains how needs affect parent-child interaction on a day-to-day basis. The next section presents Erickson's (1950) stages of emotional development, focusing on the emotional need of the child at each stage and on the kinds of parental behavior that facilitate growth at each stage. Erickson's model, systems theory, and the concept of "scripting" from Transactional Analysis are combined to explain the effects of family interactions on a growing child's personality development. Two other important concepts in this section include how families serve as a transmitter of both familial and cultural values, and how individuals' self-concepts are derived primarily from their interactions with the family.

The final section of the course focuses on an individual's self-evaluation; specifically, on self-esteem and its importance in the development of an emotionally healthy child. This section first involves looking at self-esteem on a personal level with the participants, and then teaches them positive com-

munication skills, which raise the self-esteem of both the sender and the receiver.

The entire approach to parenting of the "Curriculum" is positive. That is, attempts are made to have parents begin thinking about themselves as parents and to enable them to choose consciously what they as parents would like to do, rather than adopting the automatic, acquired patterns that are often the main source of parenting skills and values.

A trained psychologist, who participated in the development of the "Curriculum," but who was neither affiliated with THE PROGRAM nor its work release center (i.e., program center) conducted the classes in which the Curriculum was used. The classes met twice a week for 2 hr over a period of 24 weeks.

In an attempt to assess changes in participants in areas covered in the Education for Parenthood Curriculum, pre and post-test data were collected. Answers to the following questions were sought:

1. Are there positive changes in participants' self-evaluations at the conclusion of the training program?
2. Do participants show positive changes in parenting expectations and attitudes at the conclusion of the program?

## METHOD

Project participants were 29 females who had initially been incarcerated at the Allegheny County Jail, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but who either requested or were assigned by judges to The Program Center operated by THE PROGRAM, a private, nonprofit organization. Beginning in March of 1984, all women residing at The Program Center participated in the Parent Education Program. The Program Center, an alternative to incarceration at the Allegheny County Jail, is a structured community treatment program for female offenders. The average length of stay at the facility is 6 months, although some residents remain longer.

Prior to enrolling in the program, each participant was administered a pretest questionnaire by a trained interviewer not affiliated with the intervention. This instrument contained items pertaining to the participants' individual and family characteristics and measures of selected variables, such as self-esteem and parenting expectations, knowledge, and attitudes. The specific devices used to measure these variables are presented below.

### Self-Evaluation

The individual's self-evaluation was assessed using the Self-Evaluation Inventory (SEI) (Schaefer *et al.*, 1984). The instrument consists of five constructs: locus of control, efficacy, self-esteem, self-control and self-criticism.

### *Locus of Control*

This scale contains eight items that measure the individual's belief that she controls her environment (internal) or is controlled by external forces (Schopler *et al.*, 1973).

### *Efficacy Scale*

This scale consists of five items which evaluate the individual's belief that she has the power to produce effect or to make things happen.

### *Self-Esteem Scale*

This scale consists of three items and is an adaptation of Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale and measures the individual's feelings of self-respect and inadequacy.

### *Self-Control Scale*

This scale includes four items which assess the individual's belief that she is capable of controlling her actions.

### *Self-Criticism*

This scale consists of four items which measure the extent to which the individual censures or judges her actions or behavior.

These scales currently are being employed in a longitudinal study of low-income mothers who are receiving services from public health departments in Greensboro, North Carolina (Schaefer, 1985).

For scoring purposes, scale scores are constructed for each concept comprising the SEI. High scores indicate that the individual is strong on that construct. On locus of control, a low score reflects a tendency toward external control; a higher score suggests that the respondent values autonomous behavior and believes she is in control of her life.

## **Assessment of Parenting Attitudes and Knowledge**

Parenting attitudes and knowledge were assessed by the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI). Four subscales comprise this inventory, which identifies attitudes or beliefs that place individuals at high risk of child maltreatment (Bavolek, 1984). These include beliefs in childrear-

ing and parenting practices that could lead to physical or emotional abuse, or to neglect.

### *Developmental Expectation of Children*

This subscale (six items) evaluates the extent to which the parent demands that children perform specific behaviors that exceed the child's developmental capability.

### *Empathetic Awareness of Children's Needs*

On this eight-item subscale the extent to which the parent has an empathetic awareness of the needs of the child and values and recognizes these needs is examined.

### *Parental Belief in Corporal Punishment*

This 10-item subscale assesses the degree to which the parent believes in the use of corporal punishment (e.g., hitting, slapping, spanking) as a means of disciplining children.

### *Parent Looking to the Child for Satisfaction of the Parent*

The extent to which the mother looks to the child for satisfaction of her own emotional needs, and expects the child to be responsible for her comfort, care, and happiness is measured by this eight-item subscale.

Participants are asked to respond to items on a five-point scale (*Strongly Agree, Agree, Uncertain, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree*).

The AAPI is scored by standardizing the raw scores for each of the subscales. The standard scores are compared to the profile of non-abusive and abusive adult populations.

A post-test was administered to each female following her termination from the program. The post-test consisted of the same instrument described above, except that an alternate form of the AAPI was administered. The major differences between the two AAPI Forms is a slight wording change on eleven items.

## **Subjects**

Twenty women completed the parent education classes. Nine women failed to complete the program because they were either released from the

facility, escaped, or returned to the local county jail because of failure to comply with the Program Center's regulations. An analysis of the socio-demographic and background characteristics of these women showed that they did not differ significantly from the women who remained in the program.

Of the 20 subjects, 15 were black and five were white. The mean age of the subjects was 24 years (range = 19 to 44 years).

Sixteen of the 20 women had at least one child. The ages of these children, of whom there were 34, ranged from 1 to 23 years. The majority of the children were less than 10 years of age, and 21 (61%) were living with their mothers at the time of their last arrest. The remaining children were living either on their own or with relatives. Only one child was reported as residing in a child welfare institution.

Most of the mothers regarded the separation from their children as temporary. A substantial proportion (14 of the 16 mothers) intended to reunite with their children following their release from the Center.

Twenty-five percent of the women had a high school education, and almost 50% reported having some technical training or college education. Of note is the fact that a majority of these women tended to have education levels higher than those generally reported for the incarcerated female population. This finding is inconsistent with most reports on the characteristics of incarcerated mothers, most of whom have less than a high school education (Governmental Accounting Office, 1979).

A history of child abuse and neglect was reported by 50% of the women enrolled in the Parenting Program. In all but two cases, the perpetrators of the abusive or neglectful behavior were blood relatives. Forty percent of those abused and neglected indicated that they were continually mistreated throughout childhood.

## RESULTS

To determine whether there were changes in the participants' self-evaluations, responses to the four constructs were plotted on a five-point Likert-type Scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Full-scale scores for Self-Control and Self-Esteem were computed by subtracting low Self-Esteem and Self-Control items from high items.

The pretest results indicated that participants tended to report that they were not capable of controlling their actions, did not judge or censure their actions or behavior, but felt they were in control of their environments. Additionally, subjects scored low on feelings of self-respect and adequacy.

Results of paired *t* tests that were computed to examine possible differences between pre- and post-test responses are presented in Table I. As the

**Table I.** Changes in Participants' Self-evaluation

| Subscales        | Self-Evaluation Inventory |     |          |     | Significance |
|------------------|---------------------------|-----|----------|-----|--------------|
|                  | Pretest                   |     | Posttest |     |              |
|                  | Mean                      | SD  | Mean     | SD  |              |
| Self-control     | 1.7                       | 7.2 | 3.0      | 4.8 | NS           |
| Self-esteem      | 9.5                       | 6.0 | 12.7     | 5.6 | $p > 0.001$  |
| Efficacy         | 21.3                      | 2.3 | 21.6     | 2.4 | NS           |
| Locus of control | 30.6                      | 5.7 | 29.3     | 3.6 | NS           |
| Self-criticism   | 12.3                      | 5.9 | 12.3     | 4.0 | NS           |

table indicates, there was a substantial improvement in self-esteem scores. Some increase also was noted on self-control scores; however, the change was not significant. Also, efficacy, loss of control, and self-criticism scores remained essentially unchanged.

To evaluate pre- post-test differences in parenting attitudes, expectations, and knowledge, responses to the AAPI were examined. First, items on the questionnaire were reversed so that a rating of 1 indicated "Strongly Agree" while a rating of 5 meant "Strongly Disagree." Therefore, a high score on a particular construct consistently reflected a positive attitude in terms of appropriate childrearing behavior. Raw scores were computed for each construct and these were transferred into standard scores (Sten Scores) for each subject. Computations of Sten Scores were made in accordance with the standards established by Bavolek (1984).

Prior research has indicated significant raw score differences between black and white populations as well as between females and males (Bavolek, 1984). Since the researchers had no prior knowledge that any of the subjects might be abusive, conversion standards specific to non-abusive black and nonabusive white females were used for transforming the raw scores to Sten Scores.

Sten scores for each construct were "normalized" for the general population and were scaled in three groups: (1) *Low Sten Scores* (1-4) indicate a deficit in a construct and a tendency toward inappropriate behavior; (2) *Moderate Sten Scores* (5-6) indicate average or normal performance on the construct and a tendency toward appropriate childrearing; (3) *High Sten Scores* (7-10) indicate a high value of the construct and a tendency toward appropriate childrearing attitudes.

As shown in Table II, the pretest analysis indicates that participants' attitudes and expectations about the skills children should be able to perform at particular developmental levels, and about the use of corporal punishment as a means of discipline, were within the normal or average range. However, participants scored low on the extent to which they believed that parents had to be aware of the child's needs and values.



**Table II.** Changes in Participants' Parenting Attitudes and Expectations

| Constructs                 | Knowledge Attitudes and Values |     |          |     | Significance |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----|----------|-----|--------------|
|                            | Pretest                        |     | Posttest |     |              |
|                            | Mean                           | SD  | Mean     | SD  |              |
| Inappropriate expectations | 6.3                            | 2.0 | 5.3      | 1.5 | $p > 0.03$   |
| Lack of empathy            | 2.9                            | 2.0 | 2.9      | 2.3 | NS           |
| Corporal punishment        | 6.8                            | 1.6 | 5.4      | 1.6 | $p > 0.001$  |
| Role reversal              | 5.0                            | 2.3 | 5.4      | 2.2 | NS           |

Paired *t* test procedures indicated significant differences between pre- and post-test scores for the “Corporal Punishment” and “Inappropriate Expectation” constructs. Since the mean scores on the post-tests for both “Inappropriate Expectations” and “Corporal Punishment” were less than those on the pre-test, few participants revealed sensitivity toward inappropriate child maltreatment after the parent education sessions.

In summary, the results indicated that there were significant differences between pre- and post-tests on measures of participants' Self-Esteem, Beliefs in Corporal Punishment, and Inappropriate Expectations. Changes in participants' assessment of Self-Esteem was in a positive direction, while the changes in Corporal Punishment and Inappropriate Expectation were contrary to expectations.

### DISCUSSION

The conclusion drawn from the research is that incarcerated mothers, because of their low self-esteem and lack of empathy for their children, are a group at risk for future parental difficulties. That the program participants entered parenting classes with beliefs indicative of inappropriate parenting and left the program essentially unchanged, might suggest that the parenting classes were ineffective. However, before passing judgment on the parenting program, one must consider certain factors. First, the results presented here cannot be considered a conclusive critique of the program, given some of the study's limitations, particularly its relatively small sample size, and the lack of a comparison group.

Second, there could be other possible explanations for the present findings. For example, it is plausible that the parenting classes did not provide sufficient information to help women change their expectations, knowledge, and attitudes about parenting. That is, the instructor of the *Education for Parenthood Curriculum* which was developed only in 1984, may have fo-

cused more attention on sessions devoted to changing parents' self-evaluations than on changing their childrearing knowledge and attitudes. A review of the log maintained by the parent trainer tended to support this notion in that it showed that only three sessions out of 48 were devoted to issues of discipline and management of child development. Additionally, it may be unrealistic to expect change to occur in parenting attitudes and behavior so shortly after exposure to the program. The knowledge and attitudes that these females have regarding parenting are products of their unique life histories and experiences. And to expect changes in these areas after a 24-week program may be unrealistic. Changes may not be observed until these females have opportunities to practice or model the parenting practices, child management techniques, and problem-solving skills they acquired.

Recognizing the questions raised by this study, a follow-up assessment is being conducted on the released mothers and their children. Further, an investigation with matched controls is currently being carried out. This study is examining parent and child outcomes in three conditions: (1) female offenders/mothers who are not participating in the Parent Education Program; (2) female offenders/mothers who are receiving the intervention but who are unable to practice their skills in supervised sessions with their children; and (3) female offenders/mothers who are participating in the parenting program and who are able to practice their skills on their children.

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