



▼ *Long Distance Dads*

▼ *Randell D. Turner, Ph.D.*

“Dignity is a commodity in prison, something useful and valuable, and in most cases rarely issued to inmates.” When my friend and father of four, shared this profound nugget of truth with me, it resounded with wisdom born of experience. Nonetheless, he has refused to let his prison experience diminish his role as a father, in spite of the difficulties and barriers that all inmates encounter.

Some of the most loving and inspiring fathers I’ve had the privilege to meet and work with are fathers who are or were in prison! If that sounds strange to you, good; it did to me too, at first! But it didn’t take long to realize that incarcerated fathers share the same passion for their children as fathers in the community, as well as the same struggles in understanding just who or what a father is.

A good illustration of this point was reflected in an article entitled, “Barred From Their Children” published in the March 14, 1999, Sunday Edition of The Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper.

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Quoting an incarcerated father on death row for seven years, it reads, “I have been in six prisons and one common denominator I have seen are men who *say* they want to take care of their children. They mean it when they say it. Then when they get out, the children are the last things on our minds. A lot of us just don’t know what a father is. We don’t even know what a man is!”

Sound familiar? It should, because many fathers in our communities have echoed the same sentiment, if not those exact words. So now that we see the problem, you may ask the

obvious question, “Will the fatherhood movement have an impact on incarcerated fathers?” The answer is, “Yes, the fatherhood movement will impact incarcerated fathers, on top of that, in some states the work has already begun!”

With the number of adults incarcerated in this country surpassing the two million mark this year, many federal, state and county prison officials are seeking alternatives to reduce this upward trend. In several states, like Pennsylvania and Missouri, the Department of Corrections has begun developing and implementing incarcerated fatherhood programs within their correctional facilities in an effort to reduce the recidivism rates. Additionally, we are working with personnel from federal and state correctional facilities in numerous other states and most recently, in Canada.

Furthermore, many community based fatherhood programs are facilitating weekly support groups for fathers in their county prisons. Once they return to the

community, fathers are able to seek assistance with job training, education, counseling, and support, from the fatherhood program.

If you really want to change the hearts of men – change how they view themselves. Get them to truly see themselves for who they were, are today and who they are becoming.

This encounter with an incarcerated fathers group, is the first discussion many men have had with anyone, as to just what a father is. This reality is regrettable, even more so when you consider that recent statistics reveal, over seventy percent of incarcerated fathers grew up in fatherless households. As a result, in some institutions, fathers and sons are serving time together, sharing their family's "legacy." One of the reasons I joined the National Fatherhood Initiative was because we shared a common vision that included fathers from all walks of life, even fathers who were serving time. As we continue to develop fatherhood initiatives with federal, state and community leaders, opportunities for incarcerated fathers will be a part of those discussions.

Finally, I would like to share a quote from my friend, who has helped me greatly, by sharing his insight with other incarcerated fathers. "If you really want to change the hearts of men – change how they view themselves. Get them to truly see themselves for who they were, are today and who they are becoming."

Sound advice for any father, especially coming from a man who for the rest of his life, will strive to be the best father to his children he can be, from behind bars!

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