

Teaching Parenting Skills To Incarcerated Fathers

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Abstract: In teaching a parenting class to incarcerated fathers, I've discovered that the most powerful and successful technique has been using narratives. Combining the long periods of empty time experienced by inmates with a supportive classroom environment where insight is encouraged, incarcerated fathers, through narratives can begin to understand their earlier motivations in life, the consequences their incarceration has had on their children, and the healing process they need to be involved in with their children.

Keywords: Prison, Incarceration, Fathers, Insight, Narratives, Parenting.

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Five years ago I began teaching the only full semester course on parenting offered to male inmates in New York State. This sixteen-week course is given in a maximum-security prison located about thirty miles north of New York City. Although I've taught college courses in prison for the previous fifteen years, with the termination of the college programs in prisons in New York State, an attempt to get "tough on crime," I began to teach the course entitled Basic Parenting offered under the auspices of a non-profit social welfare agency whose mission is to serve ex-offenders and the families of incarcerated people.

When I began to teach the course, I started from a "traditional" model of parenting including pedagogical presentations of such topics as child developmental theory, appropriate discipline, communications skills, and being consistent and nurturing. The classes went well, but not great. One night as an exercise I asked the students to think back to when they were 12 years old. Their thoughts could be positive, negative, or neutral. I just wanted them to try to remember back to a time when they were boys. I asked for volunteers to share some thoughts and immediately several hands went up. Memories ranged from sitting on the front stoop in the summer waiting for the ice cream truck to come down the street to the first time kissing a girl to being beaten by an alcoholic father to attending the funeral of a friend who was shot by a stray bullet. More important than the stories were the emotions that began to rise to the surface. Many of the men had begun to get in touch with feelings long forgotten. I seized on these newly emerging feelings and told the class that everyone in the room was now 12 years old and asked them, as 12 years olds, what did they want from their parents? What did they need as 12 years olds? A very animated and heartfelt discussion followed. This was the beginning of using narratives to teach parenting to incarcerated men. Over the years narratives have become one of the prime means of my teaching parenting skills in prison.

Teaching parenting to men is always a challenge. As men we have to look inside ourselves to our earlier experiences as sons, grandsons, and brothers. We have to explore our own definitions of who men are; who fathers are; and what masculinity is. We need to find the courage inside of us to admit that often our definitions of masculinity are confining and our ideas of fatherhood are too concrete. In the classroom the men begin by understanding both the environment that they currently find themselves in and how they have learned to adjust to it. Being incarcerated creates a new world for people requiring a new set of survival skills.

The Concept of Time in Prison

In prison there is a saying that "you do your time or your time will do you." While all of us in the larger society often cannot find enough time to do all of the things that we feel we need to do, in prison time is often the only thing that men have in abundance. Incarcerated fathers often feel that they must harness time so that time serves their needs. Some do this by joining groups, becoming religious, participating in sports and weight training, and/or learning new skills. If these men don't structure their time, time becomes endless and slow moving. Indeed, in order to psychologically survive in prison, men

need to master time. Time takes on a different dimension in prison. Frequently men will say that they are “short” because they “only” have four years left in prison. Compared to other men in prison who have over twenty five years left on their sentences, four years does sound like a short time. However, in the larger society four years is a “long” period of time. It is long enough for a full presidential term in office; for a person to enter high school or college as a freshman and graduate as a senior; and for an enlisted person to complete a full term in the military and begin to receive veteran’s benefits.

No matter what activities incarcerated men participate in, what organizations they join, or goals they set for themselves, each and every night is exactly the same. Every night they are locked into cells, often in single man cells, lie on their beds and think about their lives. They think about their past and the things they did and never did. They begin to think about their past motivations for their behaviors. They think about how they felt as boys and young men. They think about their present. They think about the state of their lives, their families, and their abilities to survive in this prison environment. If they are emotionally strong, they think about the future. At times they dare to dream and plan. This requires great fortitude because so often in their lives, dreaming and planning has lead to failure, disappointment, and heartache. Compton (1979) states that the ability to set and maintain goals is a result of having hope and believing change is possible. Dreaming and planning means believing there is a future. When a man is facing twenty-five years in prison believing that there is indeed a future requires much emotional fortitude. This all leads to self-reflection and allowing themselves to emotionally feel.

Stephen is 32 years old. He was sentenced to twenty years for a series of burglaries and has been incarcerated for the last eight years. He states “After being here for eight years and sleeping in the same cell every night, if you are strong enough, you begin to face the truth within your life. You begin to understand your motivations in life and eventually you begin to really feel the consequences of those motivations. You begin to see how you have hurt yourself, your victims, your family, and especially your children. I lay in my cell and I listen to the noise and the silence. I think about my two kids, Nina and little Stephen every night. I think about how I was always too busy running the streets to spend much time with them. I think about how I have deeply hurt them by committing crimes and coming to prison. But most of all, I think about how I can become a better father to them and not necessarily make up for lost time, but be a loving and positive role model.”

Dan was sentenced to fifteen years for a series of robberies. He states that getting money, jewelry, and cars were just a “perk” in robbing people. The true “rush” that he felt was when he pointed his gun at a victim and for a few moments he was “in control” of the world. “When I held someone up, I became the most important person in the victim’s world. Rich, powerful people were under my control for a few minutes. After laying in my cell night after night, year after year, I realize that I thought I was nothing but shit, and the only way I could temporarily not feel like shit was to get a crime victim and control his world for a little while.”

Incarceration allows men to reflect upon themselves and their lives. It is imperative that as the teacher I support their ability to reflect, develop this ability to reflect more deeply, and connect this new founded insight into the concept of parenting from a distance, indeed parenting from prison.

Teaching Parenting in Prison

The existence and success of any program in prison rests with the administration of the prison. The support of the administration ensures that the classes will be allowed to meet as scheduled. It means that the men will be allowed access to the schoolrooms in the evenings and that me as a civilian will be granted admission into the prison. Strong support of the administration means that the correctional officers will not interfere with the scheduled running of the program, they will not enter the class to take special body counts or question the validity of school passes. Consistency is paramount in teaching parenting and working with incarcerated fathers. Both parenting students and/or incarcerated fathers need to understand the importance of consistency in all of our lives, especially in the lives of children. The consistency in the classroom becomes a model for consistency elsewhere. The administration's approval guarantees that consistency in being allowed to meet will occur.

The sixteen-week parenting class meets one night a week for two and a half hours. The course is divided into specific units covering such topics as communicating with your child; teaching your child ethics and morals; instilling cultural/racial pride within your child; discipline versus punishment; and understanding child and human development among other units. Each unit has a factual component where information is presented in a pedagogical manner and augmented with discussions and role-plays. An icebreaking exercise that is designed to encourage insight and honesty is done during the first class. I draw an outline of a chart on the blackboard. On the top of the chart is written "Reasons for Enrolling in a 16-Week Parenting Class." On the left side of the chart is written "Stated Reasons" on the right side of the chart – "Unstated Reasons." The stated reasons are easy to elicit from the class: "To be a better father;" and "To learn how to parent from prison." The unstated reasons initially create a silence. Slowly and tentatively a brave hand is held up and a student cautiously states, "To impress the parole board." The student is absolutely correct for in prison when a person is up for review for possible parole the more certificates of completion that a person has in his file, the better his chances are to "make" parole. With the acknowledgement that taking the parenting class is a possible way of impressing the parole board, a heavy fog is lifted as the "secret" reason is dispelled. Soon other reasons are eagerly listed:

- Impress your child's mother that you've "really changed."
- Impress other family members.
- Attempt to start or renew a relationship with one or more of your children.
- Bored, and one of the few programs available.
- Get to attend a graduation ceremony at the completion of the course.
- Meet guest speakers who come in from the outside world.
- Good food at the graduation ceremony.
- Heard that the instructor had a good sense of humor.
- Instructor could be a potential resource of help with employment after you are paroled.

- Sprained your ankle and cannot play ball for a few weeks.
- Understand that some interesting films are shown during the course of the semester.
- Enjoy writing and view the parenting course as an opportunity to write more.

I tell the students that all these reasons are valid. In fact, in life, we sometimes initiate things for one reason only to discover that we were being motivated by other behavior. One student, Jason gives an example of his older brother Robert. Robert was addicted to crack cocaine and eventually brought to court and charged with several crimes. Robert was given a choice of 18 months in a residential drug program or 18 months in prison. Robert chose the residential drug program only because it wasn't prison. He went to the program unmotivated and with low expectations. As time went on, Robert began to view his life differently; he began to see a future for himself. He became more and more motivated and not only completed the program but also eventually went to school to become a certified drug counselor. He now is employed in the same program where he formerly was a resident. Robert, at the initiation of his substance abuse program placement never dreamed of how it would have such a positive life long affect on him. Likewise, men enroll in the parenting course for a variety of reasons – all of them being valid.

The role-plays become problem-solving exercises between father and child even though, obviously, the children themselves are never present. With each weekly topic, the men are strongly encouraged to be insightful into their own past experiences and motivations. For example, in the unit concerning instilling cultural/racial pride, the men first need to examine how they really feel about bring from a specific cultural group. They are encouraged to react to the various stereotypes (both positive and negative) regarding their cultural group. They need to remember how they felt as boys and whom they held as role models. While there is always a lively discussion, the men are not forced to disclose their feelings. Disclosure occurs when individual students feel the need to do so.

Larry is African-American. He was raised by his grandparents in South Carolina and later, New York. He grew up in the late 1960's and although he was too young to participate in the Black Panther movement, he remembers the pride he felt within his community about the power and the media attention the Black Panthers received at that time. He remembers James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud" being constantly played on the radio. Yet he also remembers his grandmother wanting to comb his hair and bragging to the other older women in the neighborhood that her grandson Larry had "such good hair." Larry states that his grandmother's boasts made him feel both uncomfortable yet proud. He realized that "good hair" meant "straight" as opposed to "nappy" and that despite the slogans of "Black Pride" that he embraced; part of him enjoyed being seen as having a "white" physical characteristic.

What is important is that the men get in touch with their feelings, not necessarily that they share them. The students as men and fathers need to understand their own feelings about themselves before they can teach understand and teach their children. The setting

for all of the role-plays is the prison visiting room. By pretending that the father-child interactions are taking place in the visiting room gives the role-plays a feeling of greater authenticity for the men's interactions are limited to those allowed by the rules governing conduct during visits. A situation is given to the father and son actors. For example, a thirteen-year-old son is visiting his father. The son is very involved in rap music and performs some of his own rap songs for his fathers. Within the lyrics are references to "niggers" (the father and son are both African-American). How does the father handle the situation?

Father: Son, I think you have a lot of talent but why do you use the "n" word?

Son: Aw, come on pop. It's nothing, that what we call each other. It means we're friends, we're homeboys.

Father: Too many of our people died in trying to stop the white man from referring to us like that.

Son: That's old fashion, pop. If we make the word our own, then we take the power out of it.

Father: That's not true, son. By us using that word, we're disrespecting ourselves. We're telling ourselves and others that we truly dislike ourselves. There are hundreds of other words to describe us but choosing the vilest, most hateful word to call our selves is wrong. We must respect ourselves more.

The role-plays generate a class discussion about the subject. There are few right or wrong answers. Instead, everyone must resolve the issue for himself.

The students are given regular homework assignments where they must write about some life experience. The first assignment is to write about a boyhood memory with either their father, someone who played a father-like role, or if neither existed, a memory of what it was like growing up without a paternal figure in their lives. The students are assured confidentiality and they are encouraged to be as open as they feel comfortable. The papers are not graded, but I write extensive comments on them, noting strengths that often go unnoticed by the writers themselves. Using a strength perspective (Compton and Galaway, 1998; Goldstein, 1997; Mills, 1995) on narratives often helps many incarcerated fathers begin to see positive qualities about themselves that they've never noticed before.

For example, Courtney is 28 years old. He wrote, "I grew up not knowing my father. It made me feel alone even though I knew my mother loved me. When I was in the first grade, I had trouble reading and writing. Everybody called me 'stupid.' I knew I was stupid but hated hearing that name. I learned if I acted bad in school I was sent to the principal's office. If I was at the principal's office then I didn't have to worry about reading and writing. As for the kids, I learned if I fought a lot, most of them would be afraid of me and then they wouldn't call me 'stupid.' Others would befriend me only to get me to beat up someone for them. I didn't like being called 'bad' in the neighborhood, but it was a lot better than being called 'stupid.' It wasn't until I came to prison and

became Muslim did I realize that I didn't have to fight all of the time in order to get 'respect' and 'friends.'" I wrote to Courtney on his paper that his understanding of the reason for his behavior as a boy was remarkable and that few people had such keen insight into themselves. Furthermore, he was obviously far from stupid. His understanding even at such a young age of how to successfully avoid humiliating situations demonstrated great survival skills. He developed a successful mechanism to ensure that no one would call him "stupid." Courtney did eventually learned to read well and his writing skills have improved greatly. His spelling errors now are a result of phonetic spelling and therefore illustrate his knowledge of English spelling rules.

As the semester goes on, the students write similar narratives on how they were disciplined as boys; a memory relating to school; to grandparents; to siblings; to their mothers; their dreams for themselves; and their hopes for their children. With each reflection paper, the students begin to take bigger risks in writing and talking more about their feelings and selves. Within this parenting framework, what I believe I am really teaching my students is how to be more insightful.

Jose, age 32 wrote about his father. "My parents split up when I was 6 years old. My father would often come around on weekends and take me out for a little while. We'd always end up at the candy store and he always let me buy any candy that I wanted. When I was 9 years old he told me that he was going to take me fishing next Saturday. That Saturday I got up at dawn, took a shower, got dressed and waited for my father. He never came. I never saw him again. I never cried about it either. My mother eventually told me that she heard that he moved away to Florida, but I really don't know. To this day, sometimes, if I don't catch myself, on Saturday morning I wake up and for a brief instance I wonder if this is going to be the Saturday that my father is going to take me fishing. I get so pissed at myself for doing this because I want to believe that I've overcome him hurting me, but I'll be damned if I don't think about it as soon as I wake up on Saturday."

Carlos was raised in foster homes. "I never knew my real mother and father. Someone once told me that they had severe tuberculosis, but I don't know whether that's true or not. Anyway, I never felt really accepted in any foster home and every time that feeling of not being accepted became too strong, I ran away and lived in the streets for a while until I was eventually picked up by the police and placed in another home. When I was ten years old, I wanted to grow my hair into a big Afro. My foster mother at the time dragged me to the barbershop and told the barber to cut my hair. I kicked and screamed throughout the haircut. She was mad and embarrassed and told the barber that I was a foster child. It always made me feel bad when people knew I was in foster care. It was always so embarrassing. I decided then and there to run away the next day. The next morning was Saturday and I got dressed and left the house. I walked towards my school and ran down the subway entrance two blocks away from school. I went up to the turnstile and put my hand down the pocket of my pants. You know the way little boys dig deep in their pockets with great intensity and determination. All I had was a single dollar, the price of one token. I stood

frozen not knowing if I should spend all my money on a token or sneak under the turnstile and have some money in my pocket. I looked to the token booth to the turnstile, from the turnstile to the token booth – not knowing what to do. Out of no where, a white man in a gray suit came up to me and said, ‘Son, if you always think before you act in life, you’ll be okay.’ He then gave me a token and left. I never saw him again. I often think of him now and how sound his advice was. If I listened to his guidance, I wouldn’t be here now. You know, he may have been the closest I ever had to a father.”

The narratives have helped open the men up to their own feelings. As the teacher, I then help them use this new insight into making the transition from boys to fathers.

Fatherhood and Prison

I’ve taught parenting classes to men outside of prison, and there are many similarities between parenting classes with men both in and out of prison. Both groups often initially intellectualize rather than discuss feelings; have a rather constrictive view of fathering; tend to solve problems rather than deal with emotions; and want their children to enjoy a better life than they themselves have experienced. Yet in prison, men must grapple with the reality that despite their best efforts, they are limited by their incarceration from being full time fathers. At best, the fathers in prison can speak to their children a couple of times a week and see them once every two weeks for a few hours.

The classes are extremely honest. The students are told that because of their incarceration, their children are now five times more likely than other children to be incarcerated as adults. Their children are more likely than other children to fall below the poverty line. Their children are likely to be ostracized by other children and their parents, and labeled “difficult” by teachers. If they hide the fact that their fathers are incarcerated, they often experience intense anxiety, fear, and guilt (Hairston, 1998). The mail that they receive from their fathers is often stamped in red letters “MAILED FROM A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY” causing embarrassment and shame should anyone see the envelopes. Collect telephone calls from prison are often up to ten times more expensive than telephone calls made from other phones, putting an increased financial burden on their mothers and caretakers (Hairston, 1998). If the children don’t see their fathers on visits they develop a sense of abandonment. If the children do see their fathers on prison visits they enter a strange, frightening and confused world. Visitation in prison involves waiting on long lines and submitting to detailed searches. Depending on the institution where the father is incarcerated, the amount of physical contact between father and children may be limited. Although most prisons allow “contact” visits, many prisons do not allow fathers to hold their children in their laps. Incarcerated fathers are often assigned seats by the correctional staff at visitation tables, usually in the seats facing the front of the visitation room. Children are often not allowed to bring in papers to the visiting room, consequently, children’s drawings, report cards, homework, and art projects are denied to the fathers.

The visiting rooms are often dank and uninviting places. The furniture is institutional, often old and mismatched. The walls are cinderblock, painted gray, and void of any decorations. In a few prisons there are decks of cards and old bibles that can be used to

pass the time during visits. Often paper towels are taken from the rest rooms and parents and children use their creativity to devise games and activities out of them.

Incarcerated fathers are restricted from performing many everyday activities with their children in the visiting rooms. Such restrictions may lead to a role reversal between fathers and children, which are confusing to the children. For example, in most prisons, inmates are not allowed to touch money. Many visiting rooms have vending machines marked off in a corner with a colored line painted on the floor. Incarcerated fathers cannot pass the line, so, the children walk up to the machine, insert the money, and choose the food items. If the food needs to be heated up, the children then need to insert the item into a microwave oven and wait until the food is ready while the fathers look on helplessly.

This parentification of children can be quite confusing and frightening. The children often sense that they have more power than their fathers do. The fathers are dependent upon the children coming to visit. Furthermore, the fathers' interactions with their children are always under surveillance in the visiting room; therefore the interactions between fathers and children often have a surreal quality to them.

All of these issues are discussed both in the context of barriers to effective parenting as well as having the fathers take responsibility for the consequences now put upon their children. This causes great sadness among many of the fathers in the class. What is continually reinforced is that only by understanding the effects of their incarceration on their children can the fathers begin to understand their children's pain, fear, and confusion. It is now up to the fathers to "right the wrong." This can be a very energizing experience. The class offers the fathers a great deal of emotional support. In the role-plays, the men who play the children frequently confront their "fathers" with painful accusations and the "fathers" struggle for an appropriate response. For example, a 16-year-old boy tells his father during the course of a prison visit that he wants to quit school so he can work as a mechanic's helper in a local garage.

Son: Pop, school ain't nothing. Mike will teach me how to be a mechanic and I'll be making big dough.

Father: I think you're better off in school. You'll need an education to make it in this world. Maybe you can work at the garage after school?

Son: Nay, I need the money now.

Father: Your mother works hard to take care of you. She does the best that she can remember she isn't rich.

Son: You're telling me! We struggle with money every week and Pop, to tell you the truth, you're no help. Our lives would be a lot better if you never went to prison. You didn't mind making fast money back in the days. At least what I want to do is legal. Come to think of it, you never finished high school either! Now you're sitting there telling me what to do.

The students discuss the dilemma presented in the role-play. They understand the son's anger and impatience. They also acknowledge the legitimacy of the son's accusations towards the father. Answers to this dilemma are not easy to come by, but before answers can be attained, the fathers must begin to deal with the feelings.

Each semester, Amber, now 25 years old, addresses the class. Amber's father has been incarcerated since she was four years old. She grew up visiting her father in prison. She speaks candidly of her experiences with her father. She speaks how as a young child she made up stories to tell her friends and classmates about her father's whereabouts. She talks about an incident in first grade where she told her best friend that her daddy was in prison and a week later her friend told her that her mommy said she wasn't allowed to play with Amber any more. Amber talks about how at age 14 and for one year she stopped writing or talking on the telephone to her father and only visited him three times because she was so angry with him for being in prison. Yet during that year she still has all of her father's letters safely stored away in a book under her bed. She talks about the anger that she had for years against everyone in uniforms because she blamed them for her father's imprisonment, and how as a teenager she dated "bad boys" because it made her feel closer to her dad. Amber speaks about how it took her five years to complete high school even though she was an honor student because she believed if she stretched out high school, her father would eventually be released from prison and then would be present for her graduation. Amber talks about the arguments with her mother throughout the years and how it was easier to blame her mother for not understanding her father than it was for her father to take responsibility for the actions that led him to prison. And then Amber cries a bit and says that speaking to incarcerated fathers helps her feel closer to her father. Several of the men's eyes well up and for a brief moment everyone lets down their guard and allows themselves to feel vulnerable and almost forget that this is taking place in a maximum-security prison.

The students realize that as fathers, they serve as role models, but they struggle with the concept of being able to present to their children, particularly their sons, the difference between the father's past behaviors and them as individuals. While it is a boost to their morale to recognize that the children are modeling their behavior, there is always the real fear that they will be modeling the past criminal behavior. This is terrifying to the fathers. Often it is said among the men that their worst nightmare is that someday their sons will be incarcerated with them in the same prison. The fathers walk a very thin line in discussing incarceration with their children, particularly their sons. The fathers adjust to prison life, yet they feel a strong responsibility not to glamorize it nor portray themselves in stereotypical media images as "super-macho" men.

Tyrone states "It's always hard talking to your sons about prison. When I was coming up, going to prison was almost a rite of passage. I was never afraid of it; I think I wanted to prove to my peers that I wasn't afraid of it. In fact, part of me was probably even looking forward to it. Prison isn't anything like it's portrayed in movies and television. There really is a sense of humanity and caring that occurs within groups of men here. Yet nothing in the movies or television can portray the deep sense of loneliness and self-hatred that happens in prison. I love both of my sons and I want to assure them that I'm okay here and they don't have to worry about me. But I want desperately to have them realize that this place is

no joke and that a real man doesn't have to prove his manhood by coming to prison. If either of them ever came to prison, it would be my worst nightmare. I don't know what I would do. It's funny; I said I don't want my sons to worry about me. The mere fact that they are worried about me shows the selfishness that I demonstrated when I was in the streets. Kids shouldn't be burdened with worrying about their fathers. It's the fathers who should be worrying about their kids."

William has been incarcerated for two years. He has not tried to contact his son since his imprisonment until taking the parenting class. "I always felt ashamed to contact my son, Freddy. I pretended if I wasn't around him then he wouldn't miss me. I guess it was 'out of sight, out of mind.' In the parenting class I found the strength to write him. I apologized to him from the bottom of my soul. I told him that I was selfish and that when I was committing crimes, I wasn't thinking of him. I told him that I probably wasn't even thinking about myself. I asked him to give me another chance to be a real father and that by being a real father I'd accept more responsibility than I have ever accepted before. I only have three years left in here and we could build a great life and we could teach each other new things. I told him that if he wanted, he could call my mother, his grandmother, and she'd take him up here to see me. I wasn't sure how he would respond to the letter. I was pretty nervous about the whole thing. I was really afraid that he would hate me or even worse, pretend that I no longer existed. Last Sunday, he came up with my mom and visited me. I'm thirty years old and I held him in my arms and cried. I don't think I've ever been so happy and grateful for anything in my life."

I love going to the prison every Thursday evening. To see the students recognize their inner strengths to begin to struggle with hurts and issues that have plagued them most of the lives is unbelievably gratifying. To help them use narratives, both oral and written, is exciting. To help them break the cycle of future incarceration of their children is breathtaking.

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