

Reading

Families

An Interactive Literacy Program for Incarcerated Fathers and Their Children

By Susanne Gardner

TThere are currently 2.7 million children in the U.S. whose parents are incarcerated, and 10 million children total have experienced parental incarceration at some point.¹ The absence of parents from children's lives can result in childhood experiences of trauma, shame and stigma as children are separated from parents and struggle to maintain relationships.² This separation can lead to depression, aggression, poor academic performance, truancy and other negative behaviors. Research also notes that incarceration can lead to the permanent separation of family members in many instances.

In Baltimore, a program called Reading Unites Families (RUF) supports children of incarcerated parents and encourages inmate fathers to celebrate family relationships in a literacy-based environment. RUF takes place at the Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup (MCI-J) and is a joint endeavor between correctional staff at the MCI-J

school and the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS). Through RUF, inmates at MCI-J and their children have been able to come together and interact physically, socially and emotionally as they read books and participate in fun activities together. RUF has established itself as an important venue where incarcerated fathers can be role models for their children.

MCI-J is a men's state prison located in the suburbs of Baltimore. It has a capacity of about 1,068 inmates with an average sentence length of 13 years, although many inmates are released early due to good time and good credits. The MCI-J school, located on the premises, serves roughly 240 students working on literacy and occupational certificates, as well as General Educational Development diplomas. Classes are organized by skill level, and the general education classes include English as a second language (ESL); special education; basic literacy; intermediate skills;

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Susanne Gardner plays bingo with families.



Children select books to take home.

Photos by Maryland Correctional Institution in Jessup

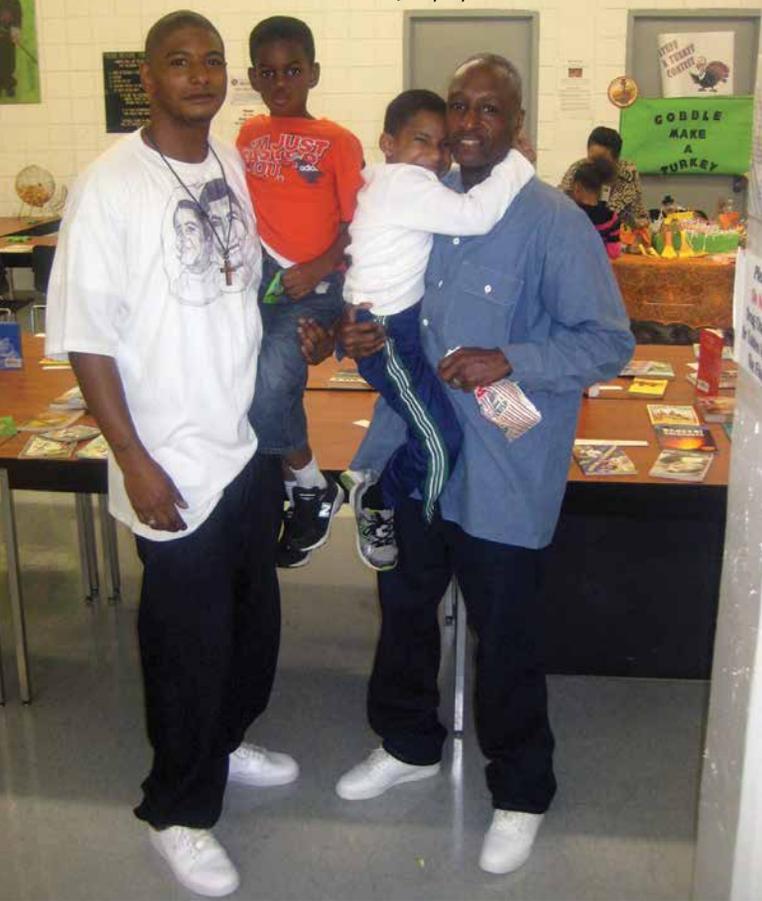
and adult secondary skills. There are also programs for employment readiness, graphic arts and vocational auto mechanics. These classes and programs are taught by correctional educators, also referred to as adult basic education (ABE) instructors.

Children of Incarcerated Parents

The needs of children of incarcerated parents are sometimes overlooked during the criminal justice process. When a parent is incarcerated, he or she leaves behind children who may or may not understand the process or the outcome. The impact on children has been well documented, and consequences of parental incarceration include economic instability; a sense of loss; social stigma regarding the incarceration; and separation anxiety.³ In

order to foster a continuation of the parent-child relationship to negate many of the above stressors, the Council on Crime and Justice advocates for an awareness of the inmate as a parent, and for more policies and procedures promoting relationships between offenders and their children.⁴ However, this is sometimes easier to discuss than to plan and implement. RUF is one such program that has been successfully implemented at MCI-J for many years and provides opportunities for children to see and hear that their fathers are safe. It also allows fathers to continue to have a parental role in their children's lives. Although incarcerated, inmates can still be loving fathers, and the physical touch between fathers and their children (allowed only during RUF and another DPSCS event called Family Day), direct eye contact and social interaction all serve as stress relievers for the children.⁵ This contact helps

Inmates Daniel Howard and Jerry Tyler with their sons.



eliminate the worry, disappointment and anger that children may be experiencing due to the incarceration. It is also joyous for the fathers, as it is an opportunity for interaction and engagement with their families.

Preparation for RUF

RUF is a child-friendly program with a family literacy focus, directed by Beatrice Gallop, who has been an adult basic educator in Maryland for more than 30 years. With the assistance of correctional staff, and through cooperation with DPSCS, Gallop organizes and implements RUF in order to foster the parent-child relationship for inmates and promote family literacy at MCI-J. Many of the participating inmates are students or former students at the school, and their participation in RUF makes it all the more special for the staff who become acquainted with family members and children of students in the school. This, in turn, fosters a community atmosphere where concern and compassion for the children take priority. RUF is a tax-exempt, nonstock corporation registered in Baltimore, and its sole purpose is to provide support to children with incarcerated parents. It has no budget and operates solely with volunteers and donations.

Preparations for an RUF event begin about six weeks before the planned date, as Gallop chooses and obtains approval from the school principal and warden to host RUF on an acceptable Saturday date. Once approval has been obtained, qualified inmates are given applications to fill out and return to the director, who then forwards them to the correctional officer in charge of inmate and visitor approval. Participating inmates must be in good standing within the institution with no infractions for the last six months and no domestic violence or child abuse charges. A theme and agenda are then established by Gallop, and jobs are divided among volunteer MCI-J correctional education staff. A November date, for example, might include the theme of Thanksgiving, with American and Native American history as a focus, and children's books and theme decorations are collected and/or bought accordingly. The books are either donated or bought by MCI-J staff, friends of staff, administration, churches or other RUF sponsors. Crafts and interactive literacy activities are planned, with each activity being facilitated by a correctional educator or administrator who has volunteered his or her time for that event. In the past, Fall activities have included pumpkin decorating, sight word bingo, spelling games, face painting, oral book reading and discussion groups for adults. During the weeks before the event, boxes are assembled with supplies for each activity packed separately, later to be unpacked at the activity stations on the morning of the RUF event. Each activity is correlated to the overall theme of learning and literacy in an interactive environment.

Inmate Shane McCallum paints a child's face.



RUF and Immigrant Families

RUF emphasizes the strength of families, and immigrant families are no exception. MCI-J has many Hispanic students throughout the school, and they also participate and enjoy RUF as a family-based program supporting literacy. Because RUF is in English, it allows ESL students to practice language activities with their children, who may also be in ESL classes in their own schools. Practicing English outside of the classroom is important for language proficiency in social situations and personal enjoyment,⁶ and RUF provides many opportunities for oral language and literacy practice. RUF uses the Maryland Content Standards for ESL in its activities, incorporating all four skills of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) to promote communicative competence. One of the favorite games is sight word bingo, and inmate fathers eagerly listen to and then read the English words on the bingo cards with their children. Because immigrant families come to the U.S. for a better life for themselves and their children,⁷ they are especially appreciative of the opportunities and activities offered by RUF. Both ESL and native students are always wondering, “When is the next RUF event?”

RUF Saturday

RUF Saturday begins with the director arriving at MCI-J at 6:30 a.m. on the date chosen to begin orchestrating the setup of the MCI-J visiting room, which is where RUF takes place. Gallop is assisted by inmates who have been previously cleared by DPSCS for participation and setup, and many of these men are regular attendees who help with and support RUF. They know the setup routine for the visiting room and each activity station, and they are an important part of RUF’s organization. Since the supplies are stored in a myriad of boxes, the men unpack these boxes, put up streamers, posters and other decorations, arrange the chairs and podium and perform other tasks as needed. Volunteer staff arrive between 8 and 8:30 a.m. and proceed to their activity stations to get ready. Children begin arriving at the institution between 8:45 and 9 a.m., but they and their guardians must clear security before being escorted to the visiting room. When the children finally arrive, they are ecstatic, hug their fathers and sit with them as the program begins. The director gives welcoming remarks and introductions, and begins the program with a group activity.

The display table in the center of the visiting room is the focal point of RUF. Three rectangular tables are put together and covered with bright tablecloths, and this serves as the setting for more than 120 books displayed on end. It is an exciting invitation to a world of literacy, but more importantly, it is a world children can share with



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their fathers. After the initial group activity is completed, children are directed to the display table to peruse the books and choose two that they would like to read and take home. At this time, they can either read and look at books with their fathers, or go visit one of many activity booths. Many children choose to read with their fathers, whom they have not seen for a while. Reading together gives both adults and children the opportunity to explore new places, discover new things and meet new people.⁸ Reading together also sets a pattern for a future and continuing bonding time between father and child.

RUF is free for families and inmates, and it runs for almost three hours. Attendance is restricted to no more than 100 people, which includes 25 residents, 25 guests (adults accompanying the children) and 50 children. The program concludes with a pizza lunch served to the families by DPSCS. Families sit together and eat lunch before being dismissed. Eating lunch together is a luxury not available at any other activity except Family Day, and thus it becomes a special meal. Inmates are then searched and returned to their cells, and the children depart with their bags of goodies and books as their guardians or custodial parents take them home.

Throughout the years, RUF has received accolades from news outlets; the Maryland State Department of Education; the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation; and a host of other individuals and agencies. Gallop has also given presentations about RUF to both the state and federal Neglected and Delinquent Fund Monitoring Teams. The common thread for all is the goal of RUF — providing a venue for children with incarcerated fathers to establish, reconstruct or mend family ties in an educational environment.

Susan Roberts, an ABE literacy instructor at MCI-J and regular RUF volunteer, noted that the best aspect about RUF participation for teachers is that they get to see their students in a different light as fathers, participating in literacy activities with their children. The men become role models for their children and escort them to different activities, helping them and reading with them. Everyone is on their best behavior, and there is no cursing, horseplay or provocative or negative behaviors. The behavior of inmate fathers is very different when their children are present. Fathers assume the role of caretaker, guardian and teacher, and interact respectfully and lovingly with not just their own children, but also with other children and adults. These fathers are often affiliated with different gangs, religions and races, but they put their differences aside for the sake of their children in order to have a fun, positive and educational experience provided by RUF. There have been no incidents of disrespect or violence during RUF in the 13 years that it has been in existence at MCI-J.

Conclusion

Many states have implemented new policies and legislation to create systems for relationship-building between incarcerated parents and their children. These states include Hawaii, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont and Virginia, all of whom have instituted collaboration, innovation and change in order to extend services to children of incarcerated parents.⁹ Although there is not enough data on the effects of maintaining parent-child relationships and recidivism, it has been recognized that fathers and their children benefit by maintaining such connections. RUF has been implemented successfully with a large amount of enjoyment by all involved. It is a program worth duplicating in other institutions that may be seeking a family literacy connection for its nontraditional populations. RUF provides physical, social and emotional support to children with incarcerated fathers, and allows fathers to interact with their children in a fatherly role and participate in literacy activities with their children. By focusing on reading, RUF helps children understand that it is an important activity for school, work, life skills and enjoyment — an activity that can be shared with their families, creating lifelong memories and unforgettable bonds with loved ones.

ENDNOTES

¹ Western, B. and B. Pettit. 2010. *Collateral costs: Incarceration's effect on economic mobility*. Retrieved from www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2010/CollateralCosts1.pdf.

² Hairston, C. 2007. *Focus on children with incarcerated parents: An overview of the research literature*. Retrieved from www.aecf.org/resources/focus-on-children-with-incarcerated-parents.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Council on Crime and Justice. 2006. *Children of incarcerated parents*. Retrieved from www.crimeandjustice.org/researchReports/CCJ%20CIP%20FINAL%20REPORT%20updated%201.30.08.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Short, D. 2000. *The ESL standards: Bridging the academic gap for English language learners*. Retrieved from www.ericdigests.org/2001-3/esl.htm.

⁷ National Center for ESL Literacy. 2002. *Family literacy and adult English language learners*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

⁸ Reading Is Fundamental Inc. 2004. *RIF's guide to reading aloud to your children*. Retrieved from www.rif.org/documents/us/reading_aloud.pdf.

⁹ Christian, S. 2009. *Children of incarcerated parents*. Retrieved from www.f2f.ca.gov/res/pdf/ChildrenOfIncarceratedParents2.pdf.



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