

Parenting, prison and pups with a purpose



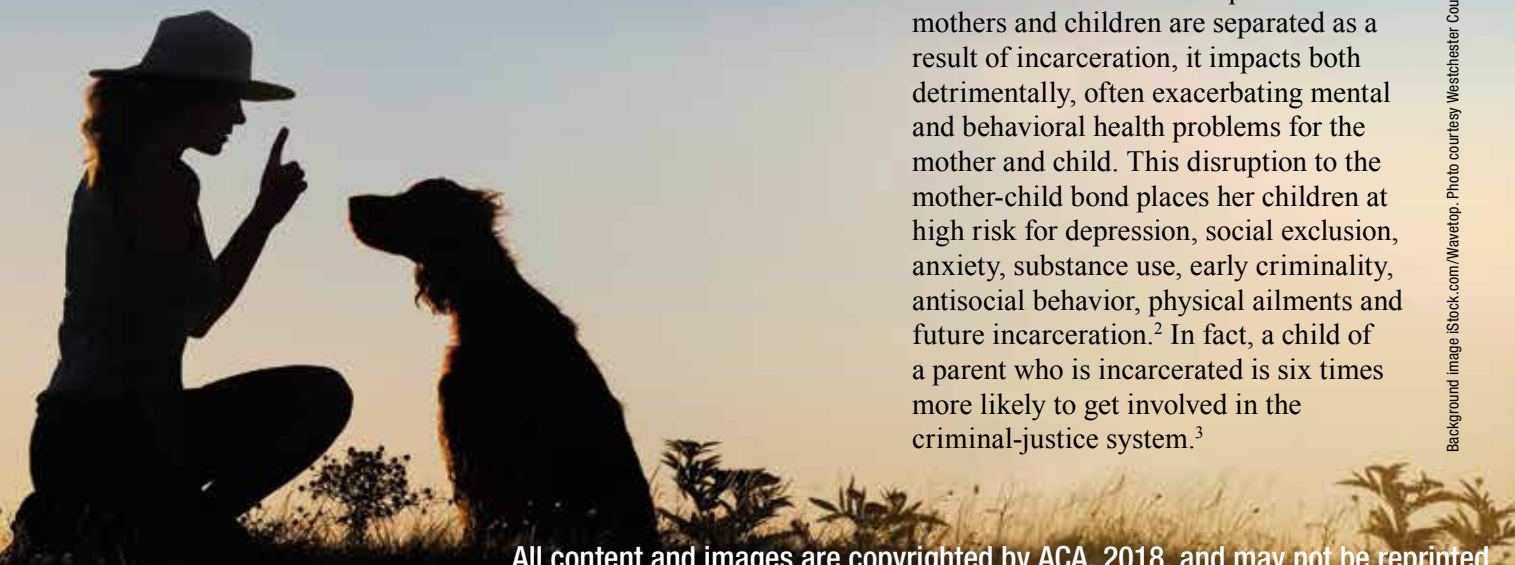
After the classes with the control groups concluded, The Good Dog Foundation surprised participants with a visit from a therapy dog.

How dog-assisted therapy can improve inmates as mothers

BY DR. KIMBERLY COLLICA-COX
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Approximately 70 percent of incarcerated women in America are responsible for a minor child.¹ This means 1.3 million children nationwide have a mother in jail or prison. An at-risk population, female inmates often suffer from high rates of depression, self-destructive behavior, physical illness and other types of mental illness; they often have more complex needs than those of their male counterparts. When mothers and children are separated as a result of incarceration, it impacts both detrimentally, often exacerbating mental and behavioral health problems for the mother and child. This disruption to the mother-child bond places her children at high risk for depression, social exclusion, anxiety, substance use, early criminality, antisocial behavior, physical ailments and future incarceration.² In fact, a child of a parent who is incarcerated is six times more likely to get involved in the criminal-justice system.³

Background image iStock.com/WaveTop. Photo courtesy Westchester County Department of Correction



The innovative use of therapy dogs has succeeded in reducing trauma-induced feelings when one has difficulty trusting others because of dysfunctional, damaged or nonexistent early childhood attachments. This is particularly important for female inmates who often have long histories of abuse/trauma.

What's the solution?

Restoring mother-child bonds can result in behavioral and emotional benefits for both mothers and their children.⁴ Hence, classes that target parenting skills are essential, especially for jailed women, who traditionally receive fewer programs than their counterparts in prison and generally fewer programs than male inmates overall. Interventions for these women can be tremendously useful in helping to enhance their parenting skills and improve their relationships with their children and/or children's caregivers. Unlike women in prison, jailed women's separation from their children doesn't last as long. The average state prison stay for American inmates is 4.5 years, compared to a national average jail stay of six months.⁵ This is a great opportunity to provide a desperately needed intervention for those who have shorter periods of absence from their children and from the community.

Because jailed women's physical separation from their children doesn't last as long, they can bring the skills they learn to their home environment sooner. Their stays are often so brief, it is difficult to find women who are there long enough to complete an entire program, but this does not mean successful interventions cannot be accomplished. It does require innovation with time management, however, and rather than offer classes weekly, jails may have to offer classes two to three times per week to increase the number of possible program completers. By helping these women, we also help their children, who

are often innocent victims in a revolving criminal-justice door. Innovative programs are necessary to provide these inmates with emotionally supportive, jail-based parenting skills that can be tested for their ability to help restore damaged mother-child bonds, enhance family reunification, decrease recidivism and possibly reduce intergenerational offending patterns.

Therapy dogs

Jail-based parenting programs can help mothers develop healthy bonds with their children by empowering them to feel more confident about parenting, by increasing their knowledge of effective parenting techniques and by promoting a healthy parent-child relationship. These programs offer support and attempt to lessen the emotional effects surrounding the mothers' separation from their children.

Significant data exist to demonstrate the psychological benefits of utilizing dog-assisted support. Dogs can help mediate the relationship between adults that enables more open and useful communication. In addition, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has numerous benefits by reducing stress; lessening anxiety; improving emotional well-being and behavior; decreasing depression;



The Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) was the site of the first control-group class in spring 2017.

lowering blood pressure, heart rate and perceived feelings of loneliness; and enhancing communication and reading skills, all while raising the perceived quality of overall health.⁶ Correctional departments have been using some form of animal-based programming with varying degrees of success for years.⁷ Preliminary results for inmates are encouraging; they are correlated with increasing self-worth and confidence,⁸ increasing social skills, decreasing infractions,⁹ and increasing engagement, specifically to help female inmates become more open to therapeutic participation.¹⁰

The partnership

With a two-year development, implementation and approval phase, Pace University partnered with the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC); the Westchester County Department of Correction (WCDOC); and The Good Dog Foundation, a nationally recognized, nonprofit leader in therapy-dog team training and deployment (all are located in New York). The Parenting, Prison, & Pups program weaves together a best-practice, jail-based parenting curriculum with the activities of specially trained therapy dogs and their handlers, who are licensed mental health professionals. Utilizing a pretest and posttest, quasi-experimental design, the partnership also evaluates the differences between female inmates housed at MCC and WCDOC who complete an evidence-based parenting program with animal-assisted therapy and learning

(AATL), and female inmates at both facilities who complete the same evidence-based parenting program without AATL. Staging the study in this way (control groups first) enabled a more sensitive and knowing process for development of the AATL version of the parenting curriculum and for preparing the therapy dog teams. This process takes into account — in a lesson-by-lesson manner — the hurdles inmates face as they strive to overcome issues of trust, emotional integrity and learning challenges. It also delineates specific protocols during each class lesson for utilizing human and canine members of the therapy-dog teams to support the inmates in overcoming those hurdles.

The partnership modeled its pilot program after the evidence-based Parenting Inside Out (PIO) curriculum, which dramatically decreased depression, lowered substance abuse, increased parental participation, enhanced parenting skills, reduced parental stress and reduced recidivism (study participants were less likely to have been rearrested, with a rearrest rate of 27 percent compared to a rate of 48 percent for nonparticipants).¹¹ The first two control groups (parenting without AATL), concluded at MCC in spring 2017 and WCDOC in fall 2017 with promising results, which are discussed below.

Normally, inmates have very constricted access to their children while in prison. Thus, in the test groups (those with the dog-therapy teams), interaction with the dogs will provide a more real-world, high-impact learning practice (HILP), which will not be available to control



AAT improves the medical, social, behavioral and psychological well-being of humans, particularly because animals are known to facilitate rehabilitative outcomes, even in prison



Three women said it improved their relationships with staff, but as a testament to MCC, the other seven women said they already had a good relationship with correctional staff prior to the program. Seven women said the class changed the way they thought about themselves as a mom, and all 10 women said that

groups. Our hypothesis is that the use of AATL as a HILP in a jail setting will hasten and enhance bonding among inmates, instructor and teaching assistants; heighten feelings of safety for inmates as they confront a wide range of emotions (including guilt and shame for being in prison); and facilitate skill-learning and higher levels of program retention than in the control groups. Parenting, Prison & Pups is a pioneer program in the way it integrates an evidence-based inmate parenting curriculum in conjunction with AATL.

Fourteen female inmates from MCC began the first parenting class without AATL (the control group) in March 2017. Out of 14 women who started the program at the federal facility, 11 completed it, but only 10 could be interviewed (i.e., women left MCC before the process was completed). A majority of the participants were women of color, with 50 percent identifying as Latina and 20 percent as African-American; one woman identified as biracial. Approximately 60 percent had a family history of incarceration, and 60 percent were convicted of drug-related charges. While participants, on average, had three children, 60 percent were unmarried. Overall, data from the first control group (without AAT) demonstrated statistically significant decreases in depression, parental stress and anxiety, in addition to a statistically significant increase in self-esteem. A decrease in stress was noted, but it was not statistically significant. Notably, all participants at MCC reported they felt the class improved their relationships with their families by helping them communicate more effectively, which was asserted as the most important skill they learned and practiced. Seven women said the program helped improve their relationship with other inmates by increasing effective communication (n=3), respect (n=1) and understanding (n=1). One woman said it also helped her to develop closer relationships with the other women on her unit.

the parenting class changed the way they thought about parenting. All women stated that the course made them feel more confident in their parenting skills, with the class exceeding their expectations. One woman stated:

There was teamwork here, which carried into the unit. It brought calmness to certain women who were having conflicts. When you know someone you are less likely to judge them. This class opened us up in ways that we normally wouldn't. People were more responsive. There were many benefits. For me, personally, it was a benefit for me to think of myself as a mom and the methods I utilized. →



In fall 2017, the second control-group class took place at the Westchester County Department of Correction (WCDOC) jail.

The second control group was held at WCDOC in fall 2017. Most measures did not prove to be statistically significant; however, the women at WCDOC presented with many more issues and problems, such as lengthier criminal histories, when compared to the federally incarcerated women. Thirteen women began the parenting class at WCDOC and 10 completed. The majority of participants were women of color, with 40 percent identifying as African American (n=4), 10 percent as Latina (n=1), and one woman (10 percent) who identified as biracial. Approximately 80 percent had a family history of incarceration, and while 30 percent were incarcerated for a specific drug charge, the remainder of the women were incarcerated for a charge related to their drug use (i.e., fraud, grand larceny, petty larceny or DUI). Participants, on average, had three children, and none of the women were married. In comparison to the federal women, who had an average of four arrests during their lifetime (half of them were arrested for the first time on their current charge), the county women had an average of 24 arrests, with the majority reporting over ten arrests during their lifetime; six women reported more than 20 arrests. Additionally, where the majority of the federal women were the primary caregivers of their children prior to arrest, the majority of the county women were not the primary caregivers of their children prior to arrest. Data from this group demonstrated a statistically significant decrease in depression, and although there were changes in the other

measures (i.e., anxiety, stress, parental stress and self-esteem), they were not statistically significant. Many of these women were not in contact with their children, with some prevented from having contact via child protective orders. As a point of comparison, only one woman at the federal facility was prevented from having contact with her son through a child protective order.

Because jailed women’s physical separation from their children doesn’t last as long, they can bring the skills they learn to their home environment sooner

In general, 64 percent of the women from WCDOC felt the class provided them with enhanced parenting skills. Many of these women commented that since they were not responsible for raising their own children, they found this information very useful, particularly since they all planned to try to reconnect with one or more of their

children upon release. Six women reported that communication was the most effective skill that they learned, with eight women reporting that these skills helped to improve their relationship with family members and nine women said it helped to improve their relationship with other inmates. Only one woman reported a better relationship with staff, but as mentioned above with the federal women, and as a testament to the



The third set of classes will commence in spring 2018, this time with animal-assisted therapy and learning.

Photo courtesy Federal Bureau of Prisons



A review of the classes

Class 1: Getting Acquainted (i.e., Parenting Styles)

The first class focuses on participants getting to know one another, establishes rules for the group and identifies different parenting styles. The community will establish rules regarding the handling of dogs. For example, participants must choose a hand signal if they feel, during the class, they need individualized time with a dog. As participants discuss various parenting styles, the class will include issues and parenting styles in raising dogs, which are similar to styles used for children. It will examine whether results will be similar and the types of behavior participants could expect to see from each style.

Class 2: Effective Speaking Skills

This class focuses on tips for proper communication by developing effective speaking skills. Instructors will incorporate role-playing, where students can practice by role-playing with the dogs. Like children, dogs are not just objects to talk at; they are beings with which one communicates. And, because they are non-judgmental and loving, speaking to dogs should help inmates feel safe.

Class 3: Effective Listening Skills

This class focuses on tips for listening effectively; students will practice these skills while engaged in conversations with others. They will review verbal and nonverbal communication by asking the following: What can dogs tell us without talking? How might this be the same for an infant or small child who does not yet have a command of the language? Children, like dogs, are not always cooperative and do not always listen. What are the best ways to handle a non-cooperative partner during the communication process?

staff at WCDOC, these women had good relationships with staff prior to the class. Eight women said it changed the way they thought of themselves as a mom, and eight women said it changed the way they thought about parenting. All the women said it made them feel more confident in their parenting skills, with the class exceeding or meeting their expectations. One woman stated, “It just wasn’t a regular parenting class. It was more than that. It felt so good and it made me feel so good as a person. I looked forward to it It was good energy.”

The third set of classes will take place in spring 2018, utilizing the same parenting curriculum but integrated with AATL (see “A Review of the Classes,” below); all partners in the project expect even more positive outcomes. PIO is a licensed curriculum, protected by copyright, as is The Good Dog Training Process and the AATL integrative components.

Who let the dogs in?

The 14 total parenting classes take place twice per week, two hours per class for a two-month period. Every parenting class, with the exception of the introductory course, begins with an emotional check-in — which encourages each student and facilitator to share with classmates how they are feeling and why — and an exercise on emotion regulation. Participants also have the option of AAT during check-in, particularly if they are experiencing a heightened emotional response. The therapy teams, human and canine, will demonstrate that dogs, like children prior to language development, are sentient beings who think and feel. Classes will encourage participants to identify what the dogs are feeling and why.

Taking account of the dogs’ uniqueness and feeling should help participants develop their own “I feel ... when ...” statements (i.e., *I feel sad when I call home and my children do not answer*). With this exercise, done at the beginning of each class, participants can label and examine their own feelings. During emotion regulation, petting and touching a dog can also help relaxation. Listening to panting dogs serves as a meditative technique. In addition to incorporating therapy dogs into each of the following parenting class lessons, the classes set aside 10 to 15 minutes before and after their time frame for unstructured human-animal interaction. →

Class 4: Effective Problem-Solving Skills

This class focuses on the steps needed to effectively solve a problem. Although problems will not always be solved, utilizing these steps improves one's chances for solving them. Real-life situations with dogs will serve as an example of how to solve problems systematically:

- You are going on vacation; who will take care of your dog?
- Your dog is ill or eats a bad substance; what do you do?
- Your child keeps missing curfew; how do you deal with it?
- The women in your unit are always fighting; how do you handle it?

Regardless of the problem, one can always utilize the same steps in their process of problem-solving.

Class 5: Bonding Through Play and Reading: Child-Centered Play

This class examines the differences between child-centered play and adult-directed play. How does one play with their dog? What does the dog want to do? How can we respect and understand that it is important to take the dog's needs, as well as our children's needs, into consideration, even during play activity? If literacy skills are an issue, inmates may increase their confidence for reading to their children by practicing reading to one of the dogs — a successful method of assisting people with reading difficulties.



Pace students also took part in some of the fun of Reunification Day.

Class 6: The Child's Job and the Parent's Job

This class examines the developmental stages of childhood. Students will also examine the developmental stages of a dog and how to have appropriate expectations for behavior based on the age of the dog. For example, do you have patience to allow your dog to explore with its nose? Do you have patience to allow your toddler to explore with his/her hands and mouths? How do we allow them both to explore safely? Dogs, like children, experience the world in a way that adults do not; they are low to the ground and see things differently. They are individual, sentient beings but rely on adults to take care of them. Can we see/understand from their perspective?

Class 7: Directions and Encouragement

This class focuses on how to provide effective directions and encouragement. Training dogs to behave requires giving effective directions consistently and providing encouragement through rewards. It will ask the questions: Why do we need guidance and structure with dogs, and why do we need it with children?

Class 8: Rules, Rewards and Consequences

This class focuses on logical and natural consequences and rewards. It will explore how to use natural and logical consequences for children by first using dogs as a model. For example, if the dog runs away, it could get lost or hurt (a natural consequence). After this, it may always be on a leash when outside from then on (a logical consequence).



Evidence of the deliciousness of the cake made especially for the class graduates.



A civic engagement class from Pace University helped act as facilitators with the first control group.

How could this relate to a teenager who fails to attend school? How could failure to implement rules impact parents of a dog? Allowing the dog on the couch creates a dirty couch, or feeding from a table creates a dog who begs; how would this be similar to what one might expect from a child's behavior when he/she is not provided with effective guidance?

Class 9: Time Out With Back-Up Privilege Removal

This class explores effective, nonviolent methods to reinforce rules and behavior. With dogs and children, one must utilize nonviolent discipline, or the focus becomes centered on the punishment and not on the behavior. What does hitting the dog achieve? Does the dog learn the intended lesson, or does it learn to fear you? Does it prevent the dog from repeating the same behavior again, or does it just make you feel better? The physical presence of the dogs, as avatars for children, will reinforce the ideas of nonviolent discipline.

Class 10: Yoga, Meditation and Stress Management

A representative from the Yoga Prison Project will co-facilitate this class with the principal investigator. Students will learn how to engage in emotion regulation more meditatively. They will practice the art of meditation, deep breathing and stretching. The therapy dog teams will not be present for this class.

Class 11: CPR, First Aid and AED

This is a six-hour class that takes place during the weekend. It will provide female participants the ability to become certified in CPR for adults, children and infants, in addition to first aid knowledge and how to use an automatic external defibrillator. The therapy dog teams will not be present for this class.

Class 12: Going Home: You and Your Children

This class focuses on healthy ways to manage guilt and avoid the dangers of overindulgence. Children suffering from interruption of the mother-child bond will have special needs for attention when inmates return home. However, the inmates will also need to relearn boundaries and appropriate, healthy behaviors.

Program participants will be able to compare the dangers of this environment to the overindulgence of a dog who is exhibiting negative behaviors due to separation anxiety. Allowing a "begging" dog to have inappropriate foods (i.e., chocolate) is bad for their health. Likewise, a dog who will not work for treats will be difficult to train. A child who is given everything without earning it will not understand "appreciation" or boundaries. Overindulgence may provide short-term gratification, especially if inmate mothers feel guilty because of separation from their children, but in the long term, it is quite dangerous.

Class 13: Healthy Adult Relationships

Since many female inmates have been victims of domestic violence, the presence of dogs can help to soothe them as they recount past experiences. Also, abusive family environments often leave dogs as victims of violence as well. Participants will discuss the steps for building a healthy relationship by asking the following: How might one build a healthy relationship with their dog? What similarities exist in attempting to do so with another adult? What happens when trust is broken?

Class 14: Reunification Day

Children and other immediate family members are invited to the facility to spend a few hours with the moms. The jail will provide food, decorate the visiting room, and plan activities (i.e., games), and each woman will receive her parenting certificate. The jail will suspend normal visiting rules and allow female inmates to have complete physical contact with their children. Therapy-dog teams will be available in the visiting area to have unstructured interactions with moms and family members and to help mediate between moms and children suffering from estrangement. For example, for children and moms who are visiting each other for the first time in months or years, therapy-dog teams can help alleviate their stress and anxiety, which will allow for a quality visit. And the presence of these dogs can help inmate moms feel steadier and help in the ultimate transition they will make once they leave prison: inmate to caretaker.



Sixty-four percent of program participants at WCDOC felt their parenting skills improved.

The control group (without AATL) includes all of the same parenting topics but without reference to dogs and without human-animal interaction. To provide women in the control group with some of the benefits of AAT, facilitators surprised them with a therapy dog visit after all classes were completed and posttest data was collected. At MCC and WCDOC, the women were very excited and enthusiastic about having over an hour of uninterrupted time with one of the therapy dogs. They got on the floor with the dog, and they laughed and cried. It was a powerful moment for everyone present.

Where to go from here

The first control groups with MCC and WCDOC female inmates were successful. Although county inmates have longer histories of involvement with the criminal-justice system than their federal counterparts, and results from most of the posttest measures were not statistically significant for the county women, there were successes. Final results may not appear as impactful, but they also began the program with many more disadvantages. As a result, they may prove to benefit the most from AAT. The program anticipates greater outcomes when the third set of classes, which will begin in the spring (with MCC) and fall (with WCDOC) of 2018, utilizing the same parenting

curriculum, while integrated with AATL.

AAT improves the medical, social, behavioral and psychological well-being of humans, particularly because animals are known to facilitate rehabilitative outcomes, even in prison. When stress, depression and anxiety are reduced, and women are given the tools to process their feelings in a healthy manner, the parent-child bond can improve, children of incarcerated mothers can fare better physically and emotionally, and reintegrative and rehabilitative

outcomes can be advanced. Employed as a high-impact learning practice, the therapy dogs will continue to serve as avatars (surrogates) for female inmates as they learn and practice parenting skills. This new program/study, with therapy dog team activities carefully intertwined into an evidence-based parenting curriculum, is a novel and easily replicable way to enhance restoration of the mother-child bond, to improve self-esteem and to diminish intergenerational offending patterns. If successful, this pilot program will establish a model that can become a focus of public policy and address some key aspects of the mental health crisis in U.S. jails and prisons.



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THE WARDEN-CHAPLAIN RELATIONSHIP

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