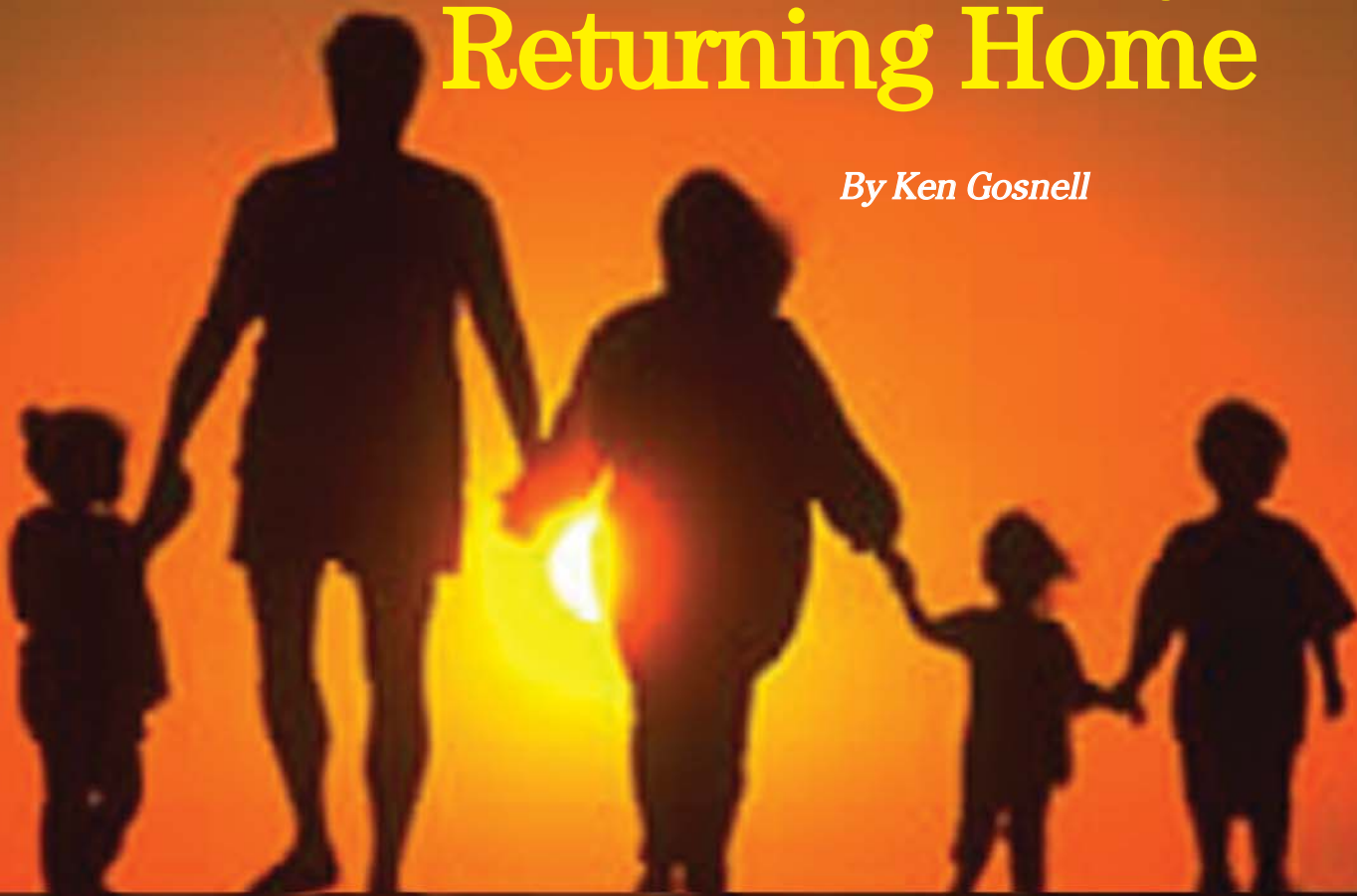


# Fathers Successfully Returning Home

*By Ken Gosnell*



Nationally, more than half of incarcerated males are fathers, affecting about 1.5 million children nationwide, according to the Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington, D.C.<sup>1</sup> The role that inmates play in the lives of their children is of critical importance. Fathers in prison overwhelmingly are fatherless themselves,<sup>2</sup> and many of their children will follow in their footsteps without successful intervention. Children with incarcerated parents are six to eight times more likely to commit crimes than children of nonincarcerated parents.<sup>3</sup>

The overwhelming majority of incarcerated fathers will return to society. But will these fathers be able to maintain or begin to build affirming relationships with their children while they are imprisoned? The Center for Law and Social Policy notes: “Most ex-offender parents lived with or had regular contact with their children before going to prison. However, prison severely strains parent-child relationships and many families are torn apart.”

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “57 percent of fathers in state prisons reported never having a personal

visit with their children since their incarceration.” The benefits of connecting fathers and children are multigenerational — without the love, guidance and support of their fathers, the children of incarcerated men are much more likely to follow down the same path as their fathers.

In addition to the impact of incarceration on the children of inmates, the (often further) weakening of family relations during this time can undermine an inmate’s prospects for recovery and re-integration into society. Recent research has demonstrated that strengthening inmates’ ties to family are crucial to their successful reentry into society. A recent study on reentry in Illinois by the Urban Institute found that family was the most important factor in helping the formerly incarcerated stay out of jail.<sup>4</sup>

Studies also show that inmates with stronger family ties have better post-release employment histories. For instance, recent Annie E. Casey Foundation and Vera Institute of Justice studies found that, “The most significant resource for supporting prison families consists of the prisoners and families themselves. Both logic and research suggest that

families are the reentry program of first and last resort.” Further, studies show that people with strong family ties during incarceration have a higher success rate for reentry and job employment and are less likely to repeat crimes and use drugs.

## Why Fatherhood Programming Works

An important rationale for these fathering programs is that inmates have a greater desire for personal growth and an increased capacity to withstand hardship when embracing an aspiration greater than them — the well-being of their children. The Center for Law and Social Policy recently communicated this point when it said, “The desire of parents to reunite with their children is often the key motivation for helping them turn their lives around.”

It is important to begin focusing on strengthening inmates’ fathering attitudes and skills, as well as helping them to resolve and strengthen family relationships, well in advance of an inmate’s release, in order to devote sufficient time to these relationships, attitudes and skills. Sadly, most efforts

— including nearly all reentry initiatives — do not begin to engage inmates until they are near or at the point of release. It is unrealistic to expect inmates to achieve the cognitive, emotional and relational progress they need to make in just a few weeks, or even months, prior to or after their release.

In 1998, the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) launched an innovative program for incarcerated fathers, Long Distance Dads, which became the largest program of its kind in the nation. The Long Distance Dads curriculum is being used in more than 200 prisons covering 26 U.S. states, making it the most widely used relationship skill-building curriculum for inmates from a fatherhood perspective. An evaluation of the trademarked Long Distance Dads program by the University of Missouri showed statistically significant improvements in fathers’ knowledge and skills in nurturing and caring for their children. The authors of the study noted that after participation in Long Distance Dads, men stated that they had a much closer relationship with their children. Many of these men even prepared activities to do with their children during visits. Additionally, these men understand their children better, even knowing how to encourage them and how to handle their changing needs.

## The Next Generation Of Fathering Programming

InsideOut Dad, the next generation of NFI’s Long Distance Dads curriculum, was released in 2005. InsideOut Dad is more comprehensive and offers greater flexibility than the previous program. For instance, it can be used at both short- and long-stay facilities. InsideOut Dad was developed by experts on fathering issues and the psychosocial

challenges faced by incarcerated parents. The new curriculum builds upon and expands the best practices of engaging incarcerated fathers, which were learned through the Long Distance Dads program.

InsideOut Dad systematically breaks down barriers to healthy relationships by increasing cognitive understanding and fostering attitudinal change, particularly by instilling empathy through group exercises and discussion. The research of University of Cincinnati criminologist Edward Latessa and others demonstrates the efficacy of cognitive and behavioral approaches that address criminogenic factors — those that are highly correlated to criminal behavior. The InsideOut Dad curriculum addresses many of these criminogenic factors, including anti-social attitudes, values and beliefs, missing or inadequate family relationships, anger and impulse control, and a lack of empathy.

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As part of this action-oriented approach, inmate dads learn how to nurture and encourage their children by communicating regularly with them through telephone calls, letters and recordings on tape or CD. In addition, inmates learn how to express themselves

appropriately and to moderate their expectations of their child’s responsiveness.

## Implementing InsideOut Dad in Prisons and Jails

NFI is working with both state departments of corrections and privately owned corporations to implement and standardize the InsideOut Dad program across the country. The Indiana DOC recently approved and designated the InsideOut Dad program as a standardized curriculum for all of its adult male facilities. This program will be required for any male with children who is going through the reentry process. The DOC has entered into a three-year program to study recidivism rates of men who have attended the InsideOut Dad program. The department hopes to expand this effort to prerelease centers, including a select number of juvenile detention centers in the coming years.

Additionally, the Geo Group, a company that specializes in the delivery of correctional and detention management, has partnered with NFI to develop 10 fathering resource centers across the country. This new initiative points to the recognition that connecting fathers back to their families is an essential part of successful reentry.

Eva Martinez of the Lea County Correctional Facility in Hobbs, N.M., recently led a group of inmates through the InsideOut Dad course. Martinez had the men compose letters to NFI in which they related their personal stories and the transformation that had taken place in their lives. Comments from the letters show how these fatherhood programs can really make a difference:

“The InsideOut [Dad] is the best program ever. My daughters look forward to the letters Ms. Martinez requires from us on a weekly basis. They have the delivery down to the day. I’ve been in prison for five years. At first, I never heard from my two daughters. Now, we have a relationship.”

“The little projects we had to do for our kids made me feel more [part] of their lives because I was doing something for them that took my time. It shows them that I do think about them, and it shows that I have made some type of change for the better. ... [The class] showed me that I can do better for myself and my kids.”

“The class has been a great thing for me personally as a father. It has showed me tools to help me in being the best father I can possibly be while incarcerated. It also has benefited me, and I know that I will be an even better father when I get out.”

As the Urban Institute report highlights, it is essential for men to have a good family network if reentry is to be successful. The InsideOut Dad program seeks to help these men begin to re-establish their relationship with their children and families, so as to build a bridge over the choppy waters of reentry. These men are communicating that this new relationship with their children is providing them a hope for a new tomorrow.

## Evaluation

NFI recognizes that in-depth and scientifically credible measurement of the program’s outcomes will be necessary to continue to push for fathering programs nationwide. To that end, NFI has incorporated pre- and post-test evaluations into the InsideOut Dad curriculum to allow program leaders to track the progress of course participants, as well as to enable NFI to track the overall effectiveness of the program.

The assessment tool will measure participants’ progress with regard to a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills and attitudes related to effective fathering. This evaluation tool will both enable the provider of the program to assess evidence of the effectiveness of the InsideOut Dad program and help NFI’s capacity to reach inmate fathers nationally by validating the results the curriculum was designed to achieve.

Although the program is new, the early results show great promise and possibility. Early evaluations are showing a high percentage increase in men who have gone from having no contact with their children to having contact with their children on a regular basis. Further, early evaluations are showing a high percentage increase in incarcerated men learning the basic parenting and fathering skills that are essential to reunification. Finally, the early data are showing a significant decrease in the recidivism rate of the men who have gone through and graduated from the program.

## A Model for Reentry And Reunification

The challenges of fathering from behind bars are clear. Physical barriers, long absences and deep family wounds make it difficult for men to fulfill their responsibilities to

their children while incarcerated. Additionally, upon release fathers can have a difficult time readjusting to life with family and community.

NFI is also moving further into reentry by developing its own reentry plan. This plan is to help a variety of correctional institutions by implementing programs and helping to cement the attitudes and fathering skills the men need to know, as they move through the system toward reentry.

After the initial phase, there are other components that incarcerated fathers can experience to ensure successful reentry. Many men, on their journey to release, will spend a portion of time in a short-stay facility. This provides an unmatched opportunity to empower men with the knowledge and skills they need to connect with their children and families in a healthy way. This time before release can be a defining moment for the offender as he decides if he will choose a new path for his future. Helping offenders reconnect with their children can make a difference as to whether a person will choose to commit another crime.

Another aspect of preparation for reunification is helping fathers learn the basic skills necessary to be an involved, committed and responsible father. NFI’s Doctor Dad workshop is a soft approach to giving these fathers the basic skills necessary to meet the needs of their children. Doctor Dad is a groundbreaking workshop that enhances a father’s parenting skills in caring for the health and safety of his child. Fathers learn how to use basic medical knowledge to provide compassionate care, enabling them to handle the majority of medical situations that may arise as their children grow. Certified health care professionals, health educators or other qualified individuals teach this interactive workshop in four sessions, each lasting two to three hours. Doctor Dad delivers an interactive, structured learning experience.

Additionally, the Dad Pack is a valuable resource that can be given to inmates in preparation for release. It is a uniquely packaged information kit that gives fathers practical knowledge to be a better dad. The information in the kit includes 10 ways to be a better dad, how to help your child do well in school, and 12 ways to balance work and family, as well as an interactive CD called “Directions for Dads.”

Finally, as a man enters his community after release, he can still learn about fatherhood. This is the broadest area and the one that provides the most opportunities to reach fathers. However, the vast network of social services programs run both publicly and privately lag in the amount of assistance they provide for men and fathers as compared to mothers and children. One area in which NFI has had success is working through faith communities. NFI’s 24/7 Dad Christian-based curriculum is designed to give churches an easily implemented and customizable program to begin reaching men specifically regarding fatherhood, marriage and family issues.

## Creating a Family

As social science research solidified the argument that children need their dads, it was no longer a question of “Should fatherhood programming be carried out?” but “How should it be carried out?” NFI has taken a specific approach to renewing fatherhood by working in and with

every sector of reentry to tackle the specific issues that hinder the ability of fathers to reunite with their families. By providing state-of-the-art resources for fathers and those who support them, NFI is confident that it will carry out its mission of improving the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible and committed fathers.

Recently, Jack Hardcastle, the family minister at Hillcrest Church of Christ, led a group of men through the InsideOut Dad program. During the graduation ceremony, attended by participants and their families, Hardcastle remarked, "As you can tell, there was something special that happened here, it was more than just a class. We created a family here."

Those words should rise off the page and strike deep within those in the correctional community. His words — "We created a family here" — signify a deeper meaning for those who work with disconnected and disheartened men. Studies show that 15 percent to 27 percent of men released each year from prison are expected to go to homeless shelters upon release because they have no family to return to. Further, of the 95 percent of men released from prison, the current statistics show that two-thirds are expected to end up back in prison because they have no other options and no reason to stay out.

The key to reentry is not so much helping these men reenter their communities or society, but rather helping them

reenter their families. When that is done, the difference will be seen in the lives of these men and in the communities.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy. 2003 *Every door closed: Facts about parents with criminal records*. Every Door Closed Fact Sheet Series, No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Center for Law and Social Policy.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Cornell, D., E. Benedeck and D. Benedeck. 1987. Characteristics of adolescents charged with homicide: Review of 72 cases. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, vol. 5 (Winter): 11-23.

<sup>3</sup> Gable, Stewart and Richard Shinkledecker. 1993. Characteristics of children whose parents have been incarcerated. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 44 (7): 656-660.

LIS Inc. 2002. *Services for families of prison inmates, special issues in corrections*. Longmont, Colo.: National Institute of Corrections.

<sup>4</sup> La Vigne, Nancy G., Christy Visser and Jennifer Castro. 2004. *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. (December).

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