



# Family Engagement + Professional Compassion = Successful Reentry

By Janeen Christ and Beth Bitler

Correctional systems across the nation are faced with the challenge of providing evidence-based programs while struggling with budgetary constraints due to the current economic situation. Many departments of correction are reducing their staffing levels and budgets in an attempt to survive the continued recession. Regardless of the fiscal restraints, departments continue to follow standards to address the criminogenic needs of offenders so they return to society as law-abiding, self-sustaining individuals.

Corrections officials often are questioned about the role of offender families in this reentry phase following incarceration. Many correctional employees do not believe that DOCs should be responsible for being involved with offender families for a number of reasons. Some think that families are part of the criminogenic factor and they are enablers, and corrections should not be responsible for teaching parenting skills to an offender's family. This raises the question of whether the DOC should become involved in the offender's family dynamic, and if so, to what degree? Does this work include things like family therapy sessions? To investigate this concept, one must first understand the impact of family therapy.


While providing a facilitators training in cognitive behavioral interventions to Pennsylvania DOC staff, instructors from the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute reported that family-based therapies were among the most successful types of intervention to reduce recidivism. However, cognitive behavioral intervention programming is usually the first choice. Family therapy is an approach that is time intensive and, to be effective, requires family participation. Family

members who are not incarcerated have to be willing to participate, and often they are either suspect of the system and/or wish to have as little association with the DOC as possible. Given these impeding variables, Pennsylvania provides opportunities within the state correctional institutions to connect with family, and affords those sent to state community corrections centers the opportunity to attend family support groups.

In Pennsylvania, while an offender is incarcerated in one of its 27 state correctional institutions, family members may have contact with the offender through letters, phone calls, visits and, for those who live a significant distance from the correctional facility where the offender resides, there is virtual visitation. In addition, the female institutions have a parenting program that assists female offenders with custody and child welfare issues and provides enhanced visits whereby the female offender may have exclusive supervised visits with her children without the designated caregiver. Family support groups are also held inside the institutions, and programs such as Reading to Your Children are offered. Once the offender is released from the state correctional institution, he or she may return directly to his or her hometown area or county of offense, or they may be paroled or prereleased to a DOC community corrections center or contract facility.

## Family Interaction While Transitioning

If an offender is released to a center or contract facility, family visitation continues at the center. Visitation to the offender's home may be earned as he or she adheres to his



or her correctional plan. Contracted facilities may have a segment of their programming devoted to family programs. In the state community corrections centers, a program that is funded through the Family Resource Fund is facilitated for all offenders who have children or grandchildren 18 years old or younger. The Pennsylvania DOC Bureau of Community Corrections contracts with the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance (PA FSA) to run family support groups in each of its state community corrections centers. PA FSA also has a lending library and resource materials, training throughout the year, and a monthly bulletin with information and ideas to enhance group facilitation.

PA FSA-sponsored family support programs are professionally facilitated and parent-led. An individual from the community is hired, trained by PA FSA and then facilitates a weekly family support group. Professional facilitators are often social workers, educators or others with a background in corrections. The programs last for one hour each week and are held at the community corrections centers. Topics of discussion are determined by the needs of the group. Common topics are: effects of parental incarceration on children, alternatives to physical discipline of children, healthy relationships with the other parent and responsibilities of parenting, such as paying child support, consistent visitation and positive interaction with children. The majority of centers require that each participant attend at least six sessions of the program, and ongoing participation is encouraged. Some facilitators provide certificates of completion at the end of the required number of sessions.

Support group sessions are highly interactive and stress participants' real-life situations as the basis for group discussion. Here are some examples of activities during the family support group sessions:

- The facilitator presents a lesson on developmental tasks of children at the ages of those in the group, especially concerning what they learn in play at each stage of development. Participants are offered a variety of toys, puzzles and games appropriate for children ages 2 to 10. Working in pairs, the participant's role play parent/child interaction with the toys — one participant is the "child" while the other takes the role of the parent, explaining or showing how to play with the toy. Then the participants change roles. Finally, they share their observations with the group, followed by comments from the facilitator regarding the interactions.
- Participants choose an index card with common scenarios involving children and other family members and answer "what would you do in this situation?" for

each scenario.

For example:

"You are involved in a relationship with a new partner whose children do not follow her directions or listen to their parent. Your partner expects you to discipline the children, and you are uncomfortable doing that. What do you do?" Or, "The mother of your children is angry that you have gotten into a new relationship. She does not want you to have your child around your new girlfriend. How do you handle this?" The facilitator offers feedback on participants' answers and additional information as needed.

- Facilitators often borrow videos from the PA FSA lending library. For example, they may show a video of incarcerated fathers and their children, who are interviewed about the effects of incarceration on children, the importance of the relationship with a father and other topics. Participants discuss their reactions to the video and the facilitator points out common themes and makes observations for additional thought and discussion.

In addition to the weekly class sessions, there are opportunities for special events and family programs. Some centers have areas dedicated to children's play, with toys, games and children's videos available for parents to use. Holiday and "graduation" parties are held for participants on a regular basis. These events stress positive interaction with children, inexpensive ways to have fun with children and support for others in their parenting role.

Participant response to the program has been positive. A survey of participants in PA FSA-affiliated programs statewide was conducted by the PA FSA in December 2009. Surveys of participants have been conducted every other year since 2001, and results of new surveys are compared with past results. The survey instrument, designed by PA FSA staff and a researcher associated with Johns Hopkins University, posed questions regarding the impact of the program attendance on the relationships of the participants and their family members, primarily children. For participants in the community group (a group that is open to any parent), almost all (98 percent) of the parents who attended reported having a better relationship with their children as a result of

participating in the group. More than 64 percent reported gaining “much or very much information” on positive parenting techniques. For parents attending the programs in community corrections centers, results of the survey were similar to statewide trends. Though a relatively small number of ex-offenders completed the survey (72), 89 percent felt they had improved their relationship with their minor children and family since they attended the family support program. An equal number stated that they would recommend the program to other people. Among the aspects of the family support program that were most valuable to participants were: learning new ways to discipline children (74 percent said they gained “much” or “very much” information), getting help to reunite with children (74 percent), learning about child support, custody and visitation (74 percent) and learning to be an active part of their child’s life (72 percent). These responses are consistent with the results of the 2007 survey, the first survey in which community corrections participants were surveyed separately from community groups.

Attendance at the weekly family support program is mandated for parents of minor children. According to the survey of participants, 24 percent would have attended the program voluntarily, and 40 percent thought it was a good use of their time and energy. When asked about the important issues in their lives, finding a job was the most important issue for 90 percent of the respondents, followed by gaining the trust of their family (80 percent) and mediating the negative impact of incarceration on their children (80 percent). PA FSA family support programs focus on family interaction, particularly between parents and children and between both of the parents.

## Professional Relationships

In addition to the family support group, community corrections has another tool to assist the offender in engaging with his or her family: the alliance established between offenders and corrections professionals. The relationship that the offender has with his or her counselor, the facility monitors who supervise their daily activities and, when applicable, the parole agent, plays an important role in the offender’s adjustment back into the community.

In a study conducted by Michael Clark in 2001 on juvenile delinquents, Clark identified four common factors that affect change when delivering treatment programs.<sup>1</sup> They are: client factors (40 percent), relationship factors (30 percent), model and technique (15 percent), and hope and expectancy (15 percent).

When applying those results to the adult offender population, client factors play a primary role in change. When the offender is released to the community, the rubber meets the road. The internal factors such as expectations, attitudes and beliefs impact that transition as well as the external factors, such as support systems and employment.

Relationship factors are reported as 30 percent of the contribution to change. This factor is described as the alliance that develops between the offender and staff, or in other words, the point of intervention where correctional and criminal justice staff engage the offender and build a rapport. Perhaps most important to note is that this factor

hinges on the perceived caring and understanding reflected to the offender by the counselor/monitor — in other words, how the offender believes that he or she is understood, not the other way around. While one cannot control an offender’s perception, correctional and parole staff may choose to treat offenders with professional compassion — professional interactions with offenders that engender respectful, fair and consistent conduct and dialogue.

Corrections counselors and parole agents establish an alliance with offenders that establishes the ground rules of expectations, goals and objectives. Monitors are often the professional staff who provide orientation to the rules and regulations of the facility and conduct the daily security checks. Their regular interaction establishes the tone and rapport of respect and expectations that govern the facility.

Counselors interview and become aware of the offender’s health and medical issues that may exist and the individual’s level of functioning, goals, familial relationships and employment abilities. It is at this initial juncture that the counselor begins to develop and understand the offender’s family constellation. Sometimes offenders may come to their counselors with familial situations that engender unhealthy levels of anti-social activity or obvious codependent, enabling behaviors. While it is not the counselor’s job to assume a therapeutic approach in dealing with the offender, it is his or her professional responsibility to provide pro-social direction, motivational encouragement and reference community resources — the basic principles of professional compassion. Hence, it becomes the task of each corrections and/or parole professional to conduct himself or herself as clear, genuine, nonjudgmental, objective, consistent and fair. Interaction with the offender thereby puts responsibility and accountability squarely on the shoulders of the offender, but also without an unnecessary measure of subordinate authority. It is a skill that does not always come naturally, but has recently been part of the Pennsylvania DOC’s training program.

While it is the job of the offenders to return themselves successfully to their families and the community, when corrections and parole staff employ principles of professional compassion, society as a whole and families as a system are better poised to function in a realm of healthy, life-enhancing behaviors. Visitation options; formal, structured parenting programs; appropriate staff engagement; and staff training are steps to addressing the bridge to an offender’s successful return to the community and to determining his or her return to the family constellation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clark, Michael. 2001. Influencing Positive Behavior Change: Increasing the Therapeutic Approach of Juvenile Courts. *Federal Probation Quarterly*, 65(1): 18-27. Ann Arbor, Mich.: ProQuest Information and Learning Center.

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