

October 2019

Incarcerated fathers' experiences in the Read to Your Child/Grandchild Program: Supporting children's literacy, learning, and education.

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Key Findings

This study used qualitative data to analyze how 11 fathers in a rural Pennsylvania prison were involved in their children's literacy, learning, and education before and during incarceration and through the Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG) program. Before RYCG, most fathers took steps such as reading to children, teaching reading and math, attending parent-teacher conferences, helping with homework, and singing and rhyming—and then sought to continue supporting their children's learning from within prison. Fathers used RYCG materials to emphasize the importance of education, literacies, and numeracies, while also creating personalized scrapbooks and letters that cultivated their children's literacy abilities and cognitive, educational, and socio-emotional development.

Key Implications

Overarchingly, this study finds that family literacy programs for incarcerated parents provide vital ways for parents to connect with their children. It is important to note that because some parents may have already been involved in their children's literacy practices before incarceration, family literacy programs should consider these previous practices to help parents build on them. Moreover, by including multiple modes of communication and literacy practices for parents and children (e.g., videos, scrapbooks, books, letters), family literacy programs can provide incarcerated parents with several ways to relate to

their children and convey the importance of schooling and literacy practices. What this brief also asserts is that further research is needed on the effects of family literacy programs on incarcerated parents' and children's literacy and educational practices.

Introduction

An estimated range of 1.7 to 2.7 million minor children, or approximately 11% of all children in the United States have had a parent behind bars during their lifetime (Martin, 2017) and about five million children have experienced parental incarceration at some point during their lifetime (Fontaine et al., 2017). In Pennsylvania, the location of this study, two-thirds of inmates in state correctional institutions (SCIs) are parents (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections [PA DOC], 2018). In response to high parental incarceration rates, family literacy and read-aloud programs are being offered for incarcerated parents. One such program is the Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG) Program. RYCG is offered in most Pennsylvania SCIs. It was

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designed over a decade ago to increase parent child relationships, enhance family literacy, and maintain a connection between the inmate and their children/grandchildren to enrich their relationship upon release. RYCG participants select books for their child (aged 12 or under) and are video-recorded reading the book(s) aloud. The DVD and one book are sent to the child, pending the custodial caregiver's consent. Participants may make only one video per household, but children in the same household may each receive a book. At the SCI in this study, fathers also created a scrapbook with drawings, photos, personal notes or letters, and/or photocopied pages from coloring or activity books. Parents may re-enroll in the program the next time it is offered (frequency varies by SCI).

Two-thirds of inmates in Pennsylvania state correctional institutions are parents.

Drawing on interview and observational data, we analyzed the experiences and perspectives of 11 fathers to address the following research questions: (1) How were fathers in a rural Pennsylvania prison involved in their children's literacy, learning, and education before and during their incarceration? (2) How did the fathers use RYCG to support their children's literacy, learning, and education?

Literature Review

Parental incarceration has a range of consequences for children, including greater likelihood of becoming justice-involved (Conway & Jones, 2015), increased externalizing behavioral problems (Geller et al., 2012), lower socio-emotional school readiness (Haskins, 2014), and lower educational attainment as adults (Mears & emotional school readiness (Haskins, 2014), and lower educational attainment as adults (Mears &

Siennick, 2016). Moreover, incarceration may permanently reduce a family's ability to support themselves (Martin, 2017) and parents also can experience loss of contact with children and family and termination of parental rights. Given the repercussions of parental incarceration, it is important to understand how incarcerated parents—particularly those who live far from family—maintain relationships with their children and support their children's education, learning, and literacy during their absence.

Research on family literacy programs suggests that they can have a positive influence on children and adults (Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Paratore, 2001; Rodríguez-Brown, 2009). However, although parents and caregivers are essential for nurturing children's literacy development and educational success, the vast majority of research on family literacy focuses on non-incarcerated individuals. Family literacy and read-aloud programs in correctional institutions vary in their focus and design. Some programs include family literacy within other educational programming, some hold special events that bring parents and children together (virtually or in person) to read books, and others employ a similar model to RYCG in audio- or video-recording parents reading books for their children.

Methods

We used qualitative research methods to study the RYCG program because we wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the fathers' experiences in and perceptions of the program. We drew upon the ethnographic tradition (Wolcott, 1999) by using observation, detailed description, interviews, and analysis of artifacts (scrapbooks) to elicit participants' meanings, while acknowledging our role in selecting and shaping how their stories were told. We selected this SCI because of its active RYCG program and proximity to Penn State. The SCI advertised RYCG in fall 2018 by posting a flyer on bulletin boards around the

prison. The adult education teacher who oversees RYCG gave each father who enrolled in RYCG a flyer about the research study and we then held an informational session to recruit participants. All 11 RYCG participants volunteered for the study.

We took several steps to ensure ethical treatment of incarcerated research participants (Gostin, Vanchieri, & Pope, 2007). We emphasized that the study was voluntary; that participating (or not) would have no bearing on parole or other decisions by SCI personnel; and that there was no compensation. We sought to affirm participants' dignity and self-determination by asking them to use a self-chosen pseudonym or their real name or nickname. As a form of reciprocity, we donated children's coloring and activity books for RYCG, sent fathers a thank you letter and a certificate for their records, and asked the teacher to share copies of our RYCG conference presentations with those still incarcerated.

The fathers ranged from age 28 to 48, with total (lifetime) incarceration time varying from 20 months to approximately 15 years. Participants' self-identified race/ethnicity was African American (6), white (2), multiracial (2), and Hispanic (1). Three fathers did not have a secondary degree, three had a high school degree or equivalent, four had completed some college, and one had a bachelor's degree. Fathers had one to eight children; the majority (7) had two children, most with both children residing in the same household (5). Several fathers had little or no previous contact with their child. Three fathers (Brandon, Malik, and Ron) had previously participated in RYCG at another SCI. The SCI's rural location makes visitation difficult, particularly for the fathers whose families lived several hours away.

We collected data in three stages from November 2018 to February 2019. (1) We observed fathers reading the book and adding a personal message for their children while the teacher video-recorded. (2) Afterwards, one or two researchers interviewed each father in a classroom. We took notes on the

scrapbook contents and some men read aloud the letters they wrote to their children. We also interviewed the RYCG teacher and the SCI principal (the administrator overseeing educational programs at the SCI). (3) We conducted follow-up interviews in February 2019 with four out of five fathers who heard back from their child about the video (others may have heard, but did not notify the RYCG teacher).

Read to Your Child/Grandchild Program Components

To situate the findings, we describe the program process and details about each item—book, video recording, and scrapbook—sent to children. Altogether, 18 videos, 19 scrapbooks, and 21 books were mailed to 19 children before the winter holidays.

Choosing a Book

At this SCI, RYCG consisted of eight hours of classroom preparation before recording. During this preparation, each father chose one or two books to read to their children. The hundreds of books were sorted according to grade level and age range, which some fathers (like Scho) deemed important in choosing a book. Subject matter also guided fathers' choices, both for fathers who knew their children well and for those who didn't. Fathers could take the books to their cells to practice reading.

Creating the Scrapbook

The fathers spent most of the preparation time creating a scrapbook for their child(ren). The scrapbooks included a combination of the following items: written messages or letters, photocopied activity pages, participant-created activities, photocopied text, drawings, and original or photocopied photographs. Some fathers sent additional items they had found, made, bought, or commissioned (e.g., feather, leather pouch, candy, card, certificate).

Making the Video

Fathers tended to describe making the

video as an emotional endeavor. While reading the letter he had written to his daughter, Jones recalled “getting a little choked up.” He and several other fathers felt “nervous” or awkward during the recording. Rundy had rehearsed reading the book “over 20 times in the cell just to get ready,” and “couldn’t stop smiling while I was reading because I know he looking at me.”

Adding a Personal Message

Fathers directly addressed their children (and sometimes the child’s mother) at the beginning and/or end of the video, ranging from a few sentences to several minutes. In some cases, they wrote these messages in the scrapbook and read them on the recording, while others spoke extemporaneously. The fathers’ messages included affirmations and encouragement; information about the family; apologies and explanations about their incarceration; advice and moral instruction; emphasis on the importance of education, literacy, and completing school; and/or assurances of their love, support, and continued presence.

Findings

Involvement in Children’s Literacy, Learning, and Education Outside of Prison

Fathers’ participation in RYCG should be viewed in light of their previous involvement in their children’s literacy, learning, and education. Nine of the 11 fathers noted varying degrees of involvement before incarceration.

Literacy and numeracy practices. Before entering this SCI, participants fostered their children’s literacy practices in various ways. Three fathers—Jones, Brandon, and John—mentioned regularly reading with their children. Jones noted that although he didn’t do a lot of reading on his own, he tried to read to his daughters each week. For Brandon and his daughters, reading was a nightly occurrence, supported by regular library visits. Other fathers used technological and digital tools to support children’s literacy practices. For example, Ron bought *Hooked on Phonics* for

some of his older (now grown) daughters; he described himself as “a big kid” and noted that getting into a book himself made his children get into the book, too.

Some fathers identified additional ways they supported their children’s literacy before incarceration, including singing and rhyming. For instance, Rundy sang to his son as an infant and toddler: “I used to rap to him because I started writing music. I used to, like, perform my music for him.” El Jefe used singing and rhyming to help his son in school, particularly with learning fractions. Scho also described helping his oldest daughter with math, but used real-world examples such as teaching her the value of currencies and “how to count money.”

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Education and schooling. Beyond direct involvement in literacy and numeracy, some fathers noted other ways they helped their children learn. Although Scho did not read books to his daughter, he would help her with schoolwork. El Jefe was involved in his son’s schooling by attending parent-teacher conferences, reading stories from his class, and trying to “show him how to break down words into different syllables and stuff like that.” LaDiDaDi discussed the importance of helping his son in school, particularly because he did not get such support from his own parents.

Involvement in Children’s Literacy, Learning, and Education While Incarcerated

During their incarceration, but before participating in RYCG, many of the fathers tried to stay involved in their children’s learning, though some struggled to maintain involvement due to distance and limited communication.

Literacy practices. The SCI visiting room has an area with books, games, toys, and Disney DVDs. Since his older daughter can read, Brandon picked out a book whenever she and her sister visited, and they read together, with his daughter reading aloud. El Jefe sang with his son during visits. He noted that although there are lots of books in the visitation room, the chaotic and louder environment makes it hard to concentrate on reading.

As many of the men mentioned, visits are challenging due to transportation and the difficulty of driving long distances with young children. Thus, some fathers devised novel ways to support their children's literacy. Carl Jung wrote letters to his daughter, and Rundy described having his sons practice saying their ABCs and counting while on the phone. Unable to continue their pre-incarceration practice of bedtime reading, John and his family found an inventive way to support David's literacy development: David made his own small mailbox for receiving things from his dad. John sent his wife a weekly letter with seven flashcards for different letters of the alphabet. Each night, she put a flashcard in David's mailbox for him to discover the next day.

Education and schooling. Several fathers remained involved in their children's schooling by communicating with the mothers. These fathers could demonstrate both their interest in their children's schooling, as well as the importance of school and learning in general, by discussing these updates with their children. For example, in his videos, Scho mentioned things he heard from the children's mothers, including Kayla's struggles with addition and subtraction and Mo'nique's dislike of history. John stayed up-to-date on his son's literacy and speech progress by communicating with his wife and receiving Individualized Education reports from the school.

Despite such efforts, El Jefe noted that it is difficult to remain current with children's

education while incarcerated given the limited communicative opportunities and the pace of children's education. For El Jefe, this meant he often found himself "behind on" his son's education and assignments. Such limitations make the opportunity of involvement presented by RYCG all the more meaningful.

Supporting Children's Literacy, Learning, and Education through RYCG

This section examines how fathers used RYCG to underscore the value of education, to convey the importance of literacies and numeracy, and to tailor the scrapbook to children's educational needs and interests. (A future research brief will describe how they used RYCG to create, maintain, or strengthen relationships with their children.)

Importance of education and doing well in school. To varying degrees, the fathers used the program components to emphasize to their children the importance of education and schooling. In their message at the end of the video, several fathers commented on the value of formal education. For example, Scho told his daughter to protect herself with knowledge and that education is important. Without education, he said, it's going "to get dark." He told her he passed his GED® math test and would take the science and social studies tests next; in the follow-up interview, Scho revealed that he passed these final tests, just before his release in spring 2019.

LaDiDaDi conveyed the value of education by reading *Class President* for his son Keon, who had behavioral problems at school. LaDiDaDi hoped that this book about a class president would help him "get a different approach" to education and leadership. In addition to inspiring his son to be a class leader, LaDiDaDi emphasized that African Americans must become educated to combat the "racial slur" that they don't read:

It used to be...kinda like a racial slur they used to say...Like if you wanna hide stuff from a Black person, just put it in a book.

Kinda like we won't open up a book. So now it's kinda like, to break that type of chain....You're African American. You need to try to educate yourself and read a little bit more.

For Scho, another educational purpose of the video message was to encourage his children to respect and listen to their teachers. In three videos, he imparted a variation of this advice to his six-year-old children: "Work hard in school and respect your mom, grandma, and teachers." Similarly, he urged his teenage daughter to ask questions when she doesn't understand something. These messages and the learning activities in the scrapbooks underscored the value of learning, working hard in school, and respecting teachers.

Vehicle to convey importance of literacies. Some fathers used RYCG as a way to convey the value of literacies. The act of reading a book modeled the importance of reading. LaDiDaDi, for example, noted that the video allowed children to see their father reading a book and these images stick in their minds, which then encourages them to read. John used the video to explicitly teach literacy to his son, who had been writing his name vertically. He wrote his son's name on the chalkboard to show what it should look like. At the end of the video recording John discussed how "good" David was getting at his letters and said that once he learns all his letters, he can "put a bunch of letters together and that's a word."

Finally, several fathers expressed how RYCG shaped their views and hopes for reading with their children and being involved in their education. El Jefe remarked that the program opened his eyes to the importance of reading. Though he never had bedtime stories with his parents, he wanted to start such a tradition with his son.

Tailoring the scrapbook to children's educational needs and interests. Each father

created scrapbooks with photos and photocopied coloring pages. In addition, seven fathers included activities tailored to their children's needs and interests. These items included the alphabet; math and counting; other learning activities such as matching and mazes; and activities on self-care, manners, safety, feelings, and the like. Some of these items were fathers' original creations.

In three videos, Scho encouraged his children to respect and listen to their teachers: "Work hard in school and respect your mom, grandma, and teachers."

John's scrapbook for David illustrated these types of content. It alternated between pages of "task" (learning activities) and "pleasure" (coloring). John told us he tried to use his son's interests to teach him. In addition to family photos and blank coloring pages, John included a page to practice writing numbers, a matching activity, a maze that John created, a house-building activity that incorporated John's professional experience in construction and his son's interest in building, pages about manners and using a phone to call 911, a calendar to chart feelings, and a weekly hygiene chart. Scho used the scrapbook to help his children with math. For his three first-grade children, he wrote one to 100 on the front inside cover and 100 to one on the back inside cover.

Children's responses to the materials. Four fathers reported how their children (10 in all) responded to and used the various programs, providing more evidence of how RYCG supported children's learning and literacy. Fathers characterized children's emotional responses with terms like "ecstatic," "loved it," and "excitement." The videos sparked laughter and tears: Malik's son said, "Dad, you're funny!" whereas Scho's daughter remarked, "I cried the whole video, Dad." Rundy's son, Akil (age three), said, "Mom, run it again. Run it again." His mom told Rundy that Akil "just really been wanting to...talk to me and see me. Because

every time she tell him I'm on the phone, he be like, 'Give me the phone.' He want to talk to me." These examples illustrate how the video allowed the fathers to "interact without interacting"—to have a visible and audible presence in their children's lives.

Discussion

The findings of this pilot study reveal multiple forms of fathers' involvement in children's literacy, learning, and education, both within and outside prison. Before enrolling in RYCG at this SCI, most of the fathers had already taken steps of engagement through activities such as reading to children, teaching reading and math, attending parent-teacher conferences, helping with homework, playing word games, and singing and rhyming—and then doing what they could within the constraints of prison to support their children's learning. RYCG offered fathers a way to continue these efforts, or to initiate them with children they did not know well. Fathers used the program's components to emphasize the importance of formal education and literacies and numeracy, while also providing creative, personalized materials to cultivate their children's literate abilities and their cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional development.

As Rundy stated and many participants noted, perhaps the best element of the program was the ability to be "a positive part of their kid's life and not just, you know, a burden."

Recommendations

For practitioners and administrators:

- Offer more programs like RYCG and other opportunities that integrate and enhance children's and family literacy practices with adult's literacy and educational practices.
- Incorporate different (multimodal) forms of communication (video, audio, visual art, oral and written language, etc.) into family literacy opportunities for incarcerated

parents and their children. These modes provide different routes for self-expression and learning.

For policy makers:

- Promote policies that emphasize the educational and social-emotional benefits of family literacy programs for incarcerated parents (grandparents) and children and provide funding for these programs.
- Create programs that combine parenting classes, adult basic education curricula, and family literacy programming to support a holistic and comprehensive view of education for incarcerated adults and their children.

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Additional Resources

In addition to the references listed, these resources provide more information on family literacy programs for incarcerated parents/grandparents/caregivers:

Books and Puzzles Bring Family Time to Incarcerated Parents:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/humankind/2019/01/22/incarcerated-parents-bond-their-kids-through-books-and-activities/2649863002/>

Children of Prison Inmates- Program with Children Literacy Foundation (CLIF):

<https://clifonline.org/literacy-programs/children-of-prison-inmates/>

Family Learning in Prison- An Evaluation Toolkit for Tutors:

<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/resource/family-learning-in-prisons-an-evaluation-toolkit-for-tutors/>

Family Literacy on the Inside:

<http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2013/03/family-literacy-on-the-inside/>

Family Literacy in Prisons: Fathers' Engagement With Their Young Children:

<https://medium.com/soereseach/family-literacy-in-prisons-fathers-engagement-with-their-young-children-55325413633a>

The story of an incarcerated father in a UK family literacy program:

<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/tortor-ligula>

The Storybook Program with AIM (Assistance to Incarcerated Mothers):

<https://inmatemoms.org/storybook-project/>