



Kentucky Department of Corrections Staff Newsletter

THE TOOL KIT

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Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana

By Brenda Bankston

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana (BBBS) understands the special needs of children with an incarcerated parent. Through our Mentoring Children of Prisoners (MCP) program, we successfully matched over 800 children of prisoners with caring adult mentors over the past six years. Second Chance Act (SCA) funding allows us to continue the program by establishing and supporting one-to-one mentoring matches for additional children of prisoners.

One-to-one Activities

Our MCP children and youth range in age from 7 to 18 with an average age of 11. Before SCA funding, there were nearly 100 children with an incarcerated parent on our waiting list. Since October 2011, we have matched 81 of those children with a one-to-one mentor. Our staff has been busy providing needed friendships for Louisville area at-risk children. To ensure the best matches are made, staff follows agency procedures from our national affiliate, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Children are enrolled, interviewed and assessed to learn about their unique needs and interests. After careful review of the interests, preferences and needs of the enrolled youth, a match is made with a screened and trained mentor. Once the match is made, the pair spend quality time together two to three times each month engaged in activities based on their shared interests. Through our community partnerships and relationships, tickets and passes that are donated to our agency are provided to our matches to attend community events and activities free of charge. These events are often a first time experience for the MCP children and provide both recreational and

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educational opportunities for matches to participate in during their monthly outings. Since October our MCP matches have: attended plays; made pottery; attended basketball games; visited the zoo; and spent a weekend camping.

Professional Staff Support

The success of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana one-to-one mentoring programs is based on on-going professional support and monitoring of each match. Once a match between a child with an incarcerated parent and a volunteer mentor is made, one Match Support Specialist is assigned to the match for its duration. That one staff person develops a close relationship with the child, mentor and family through monthly contact with each. Although we ask for a one year commitment from our volunteer mentors, many matches actually last for years and often beyond age 18 when our support ends.

Impact of a one-to-one mentor

Children matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister receive substantial benefits through additional attention and support provided through professionally supported one-to-one mentoring relationships. One evaluation tool we use is our Strength of Relationship Survey. Both children and mentors complete the survey twice each year – after three months and twelve months. The tool gauges how well the match relationship is progressing. If either the child or mentor responds with problems or concerns, staff follows up to address any negative issues. The surveys completed by MCP youth after three months of being matched showed progress in the development of long, strong relationships leading to future positive outcomes. Results of the ten-question survey were categorized under five relationship quality dimensions and shown on a rating scale of 1 to 5.

4.2 – Coping – help with problem solving, stress management, emotional support

4.9 – Disappointment – absences of negative situations

5.0 – Safety – feeling safe when with mentor

4.8 – Importance – significance of relationship with mentor

4.8 – Closeness – emotional bond and attachment to mentor



This Month's Family Information Section

This information is provided by the New Jersey Department of Corrections, Division of Programs and Community Services, Office of Transitional Services. The title "*What About Me?*" is a guide for discussing your incarceration with your children.

Common Stress Points

A parent's involvement in the criminal justice system often results in a series of crises; arrest, trial, incarceration and reentry. Each stress point presents new obstacles for children and families. Children and families experience unexpected emotions and challenges to established coping strategies.

THE ARREST: FEAR, CONFUSION AND PANIC

The trauma experienced by children who have a parent taken from them is extraordinary, perhaps more so if the child witnesses the arrest of the parent. The image of the person you love and respect being chained and dragged away is devastating. Even for children who do not witness the arrest, this image is terrifying.

Fueled by negative media images, children imagine the worst about their parent's condition. Families and children rarely have any information about the arrest, arraignment and detention process. They have no idea how, when and if they will ever see the arrested person again.

PRE-TRIAL AND DURING TRIAL: ANXIETY AND FRUSTRATION

The arrested parent may be detained in jail to await trial or may be released on bail. In either case this is a period of great uncertainty. No plans can be made.

Children whose worlds have been disrupted are often unable to get answers to their questions. They do not know what is expected of them or when the family will be torn apart by outside forces.

SENTENCING: HOPELESSNESS AND HELPLESSNESS

For the child or other family members, the sentence usually comes as a shock. To many

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outside the family, this can seem odd. But the sentence makes the fears of separation a reality for the incarcerated parent as well as the children and other family members.

No matter how hopeless a case looks most families continue to hope for a miracle until the very last minute. The sentencing is the very last minute, the time when hope dies.

INITIAL INCARCERATION: ABANDONMENT STIGMA AND RESENTMENT

For the child and other family members, the set of emotions experienced are often compared to the loss of a family member through death. The metaphor does not take into consideration how shame and humiliation about prison life affects the child along with economic or other challenges.

Children are well aware of the seriousness of the situation and likely to conjure up possible visions of what life in prison is like for their parents. Further complicating problems include the reluctance of many custodial parents to allow children to visit a prison.

PRE AND POST RELEASE: AMBIVALENCE

Interestingly, the times just before and after release are often the most traumatic for children and families. Problems, which were central to a family's culture before incarceration, have rarely been handled during the prison term. Children have changed during the parent's incarceration. They are older and at different stages of development. They have different needs and expectations. Yet imprisoned parents may not have seen the growth. Released prisoners often treat their children as if they were still at the age of initial incarceration.

The custodial parent has also changed. In two parent families, he or she has had to become both mother and father and has gained independence and competence in areas that used to belong entirely to the incarcerated partner. There may be considerable tension about how the relationship between the parents is to go forward.

Incarceration changed the newly released parent as well. In prison, he or she suffered a loss of identity and respect and made few decisions. The environment was filled with anger and hostility, kindness was interpreted as weakness, and there was no privacy. Released to freedom carries with it the danger that needs and emotions kept in check will come boiling up or explode. This period is also filled with expectations of a new life and mended ways.

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Children and adults alike will feel an array of emotions including the ambivalence that comes with such radical changes and adjustments. Behavioral reactions will vary with each child and the environment.

The troublesome behaviors children exhibit can also be transient—appearing shortly after arrest or after the parent leaves and subsiding temporarily only to reappear at a later point. Some children react immediately to stress, challenging the adults to protect them and prove that they are competent caregivers. Other children seem to sense that the adults are vulnerable and may not be able to manage the distress. These children often act out their feelings at school or with a “protective” adult or they will hold it together until the adult seems okay and then, they will fall apart.

There are children who can even wait until the incarcerated parent is released to really express their rage and others who will not deal with their feelings until years after the parent’s release. While there are many variations in how children and families manage each stage of involvement in the criminal justice system, the emotional impact will always cause some degree of stress and trauma.

Ann Adalist-Estrin. Adapted from How Can I Help? Published by the Osborne Association, Long Island, New York, used with permission.



Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION:

Is RNA information used by courts in the sentencing process for purposes other than setting appropriate probation conditions?

ANSWER:

Yes. With regard to felony offenders who are eligible for probation or community supervision, RNA information is used in a couple of ways to help decide whether a prison sentence should be suspended, i.e. whether probation should be granted. First, in accordance with the risk principle that more intensive interventions should be reserved for higher risk offenders, a low risk assessment score may be an important factor in a judge’s determination not to imprison an offender who presents a low risk of re-offense.

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Further, RNA information regarding the defendant's dynamic risk factors is often valuable in deciding whether the defendant is amenable or suitable for probation or community supervision. In considering the defendant's dynamic risk factors the court makes a qualitative assessment whether in light of those factors, and the supervision, treatment, and intermediate sanctions available in the community, the defendant can be safely and effectively supervised in the community.

However, it would appear to be improper for a court to deny a probation eligible felony offender on the basis of a high risk score without a careful weighing of the specific risk (and protective) factors involved in determining whether the defendant can be safely and effectively supervised in the community. As we have noted, risk is dynamic. An assumption that a defendant who scores high risk today is necessarily amenable to a risk reduction program and will continue to present a high risk tomorrow would be contrary to the research. Some high risk offenders recidivate; many do not. Generally speaking, many high risk offenders are good candidates for recidivism reduction programs in the community. Denial of probation on the offense committed nor the defendant's prior criminal record, but merely on the risk that the offender might commit a future offense. Absent specific statutory authorization and due process protections, it would seem to be inconsistent with our criminal justice jurisprudence for judges to imprison offenders solely because of what they might do in the future.

QUESTION:

Should courts use RNA information in deciding what an offender's appropriate penalty or punishment should be?

ANSWER:

No. RNA information is intended for use in determining how best to manage and reduce the risk that the offender will commit another offense in the future. It is not intended for use in determining the just or appropriate punishment for the offender's past criminal acts. In virtually all states the appropriate punishment is determined by the seriousness or gravity of the crime committed, the extent of the defendant's culpability, and the defendant's prior criminal record. In the first state supreme court case to consider the use of RNA information at sentencing, the Indiana Supreme Court specifically noted that the risk/needs assessment instrument was not designed to assist in establishing the just penalty and ruled that it is improper to use risk/needs assessment score in deciding what the appropriate length of a prison sentence should be. *Malenchik V. State*, 928 N.E.2d 564 (2010)

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Hi, my name is Hannah Gibson, and I have been a Probation and Parole Officer since 9/1/10 for District 17 at 2600 West Broadway Louisville KY 40211. This is a story about one individual's ambition towards success.

When I met "Jimmy," I knew that my work was cut out for me. He had a look of anger on his face that translated to me he had lost all respect for authority and certainly for law enforcement. The looks he gave me sent chills down my spine, but I was reluctant to show fear or scowl at him back. I knew that his distaste for me was not personal, but a result of the barriers he has dealt with throughout his life.

On his first positive drug test, I reiterated to him the importance of probation and the consequences of positive drug tests. I gave him an appointment with the Social Service Clinician for a treatment evaluation and gave him a list of employers he could apply with for a job. Jimmy did not look worried or concerned with anything that I had just told him or instructed him to do. It became very apparent to me that jail was not a deterrent for him.

At that time I decided to delve into what has caused Jimmy to be so distant and numb to punishment. He eventually opened up about his everyday life which consisted of his mother constantly using drugs and therefore, not preventing him from doing the same.

His father allowed random strangers to come in and out of the house and give him no direction whatsoever. This was also something that I had witnessed on several home visits. He then stated that he had one positive person in his life, his sister. I felt a pinch of hope and stopped him right there. "Tell me more about your sister," I said. I believe Jimmy eventually realized that I was not going to give up on him as so many others may have.

I soon met his sister at court, where he and I had been together so many times. I sought her out and she said to me, "what does he need to do?" I told her, "He needs to get a job and keep going to treatment." I also told her that he needs to live in a drug free environment with some direction and motivation from those who love him. I could tell she knew exactly what I was talking about.

On the next home visit, Jimmy's mom looked happier and brighter than I had ever seen her. The house had been cleaned and the pill bottles I had witnessed just laying out so many times, were no where to be found. Jimmy had a jacket on with an employer's logo across the upper right hand side. Not surprisingly, his sister was sitting beside him on the couch with her arm over his shoulders.

On subject's next two report days, he tested negative for any drugs. Jimmy has been through treatment three times without much success, but this time he said he is doing it for himself and not for probation. I then said, "the goal has always been for you to do this for yourself."

I'm not sure what the deciding factor was for Jimmy to turn his life around; or if he will continue to stay clean and succeed in life. It may have been that he realized he would not get the easy way out, which would have been jail. Or possibly it was his family finally waking up and taking charge of their lives. Either way, I hope that he can continue to prosper and find happiness.

