

# Families through the Bars

## Supporting Children of Incarcerated Parents

by Emmalie Dropkin  [Meet the Author  
www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue)

Early childhood is often seen as a worthy time to invest because any obstacles children face are not of their own creation; but anyone working with young children knows that they come from families who must also have their needs addressed in order for those children to be successful.

Children with incarcerated parents face a unique set of experiences that can include the trauma of separation and the loss of long-term relationships. In many communities, Head Start programs have recognized that children with incarcerated caregivers are the most at-risk, and with Head Start's 50-year history of changing family trajectories these programs are working to build strong relationships and stop intergenerational cycles.

In 1999, Puget Sound Educational School District (ESD) worked with the Washington Corrections Center for Women



Emmalie Dropkin is the Director of Policy, Data, and Research at the National Head Start Association. She previously taught elementary special education in the Baltimore City Public Schools. Emmalie earned a Master's degree in teaching from the College of Notre Dame of Maryland and a Certificate of Mind, Brain, and Teaching from Johns Hopkins University School of Education.



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

to create the Residential Parenting Program, a program that remains the only one of its kind. Through the program, pregnant women sentenced to fewer than 30 months in minimum-security facilities who meet a set of criteria are able to keep their babies with them in order to form strong bonds in a safe environment. During pregnancy, the women receive Early Head Start home visits from the Puget Sound ESD program, and the babies later attend an Early Head Start classroom on site in the facility, while mothers have access to education and job training. A wide range of partnerships supports the program, helping families access health care, healthy food, literacy resources, and more.

Perhaps most important are the bonds women form with their children and with each other. Other inmates volunteer and are trained as supplemental caregivers and play the role of community for the incarcerated mothers. Their children learn about the world through field trips and visits to other family members, and by the time mothers leave the facility they have the skills and relationships to be leaders of their families. Over the past 15 years nearly 500 mothers and babies have participated in the program, and the

recidivism rate of mothers is one-third that of the general population of female offenders. The stable, developmental opportunity has surely shaped both mother and child, and Puget Sound ESD and the Washington Corrections Center for Women are hopeful that they're ending intergenerational incarceration.

Halfway across the country, Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency (OLHSA) in Michigan has developed another approach to supporting children with incarcerated parents, in this case primarily fathers. Through the Head Start Connections Program, OLHSA reaches families in five Oakland County Jail locations and works to reduce the emotional distance between fathers and their children. Through the Head Start home-based model, which includes weekly 90-minute home visits as well as comprehensive services and family case management, fathers have opportunities to be their children's first and primary teachers at biweekly visits within the jail facility. On alternating weeks, the children and their other caregivers receive support in their homes. OLHSA has built strong relationships with the corrections system for over 14 years, along with the University



Photo by Cheryl Hanna-Truscott • www.pugetsoundstudy.org

of Michigan Law School, national fatherhood efforts, and workforce development. As dedicated advocates for children, the leaders of Head Start Connections are committed to the idea that all children have the right to be connected to and proud of their parents.

Northern Panhandle Head Start, Inc. in West Virginia has also taken a home-based approach to working with their most vulnerable families. Since it began in 2010, the home visiting model has been used with pre-trial parents incarcerated at the Northern Regional Jail to build and sustain bonds between parents and children and ultimately to support reintegration with home and the community. Beyond the Early Head Start component, Northern Panhandle Head Start operates the Inside/Out Dad Program, a 12-week program available to all incarcerated fathers that uses a curriculum developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative. Training topics include exploring feelings, community, growth, the roles of fathers, and creation of a "Read to Me DVD" where each father can prepare and send his children both a book and a recording of himself reading the book. Monthly training opportunities include broader topics as well, such as budgeting, relationships, and abuse. Of the fathers who have participated and been released, recidivism is significantly lower as they return to stable relationships and homes.

While these three programs have reached relatively small numbers of families compared to the national populations in jails and prisons, each family affected has a genuine opportunity to forge or strengthen relationships and change their course. With every family that can break the cycle of intergenerational struggle, communities grow stronger and more stable; these models offer insights for future strategies to ensure every child and his or her parents have the resources for long-term success.

### Tenacious: A zine of Art and Writings by Women in Prison

Tenacious is a zine filled with articles, essays, poetry, and art by formerly and currently incarcerated women across the United States. Their works cover subjects like the health care (or lack of health care) system, being HIV-positive inside prison, trying to get an education while in prison, sexual harassment by prison staff and general prison conditions, and giving up children for adoption.

To get a copy, send a \$3 check made out to V. Law, PO Box 20388, New York, NY 10009 or visit <http://resistancebehindbars.org/node/19>

For more history about the project, see [www.grassrootsfeminism.net/cms/node/117](http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net/cms/node/117)

