



Families and Children: Health and Wellness

Parenting Programs for Current and Post-Incarcerated Fathers: A Literature Review of Attachment-Based and Play Therapy

Jasmine Reynolds^a, Tony Michael^b, Katherine M. Hermann-Turner^c

^{a-c}Tennessee Tech University

Jasmine Reynolds is a Professional School Counselor, National Certified Counselor (NCC), master's-level clinician, and Ph.D. student in Counseling and Supervision at Tennessee Tech University. She currently serves as the past-president of the Tau Tau Upsilon Chapter of Chi Sigma Iota and is a 2024 NBCC Doctoral Fellow. Jasmine brings a wealth of experience as both a school counselor and clinician, including work with incarcerated populations. Her research centers on incarcerated individuals, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the intergenerational impact of incarceration on families. Jasmine's dedication to these critical issues is evident in her ongoing research, advocacy, and commitment to fostering systemic change that promotes resilience, healing, and equity within communities.

Dr. Tony Michael is a Full Professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychology at Tennessee Tech University and the Program Coordinator for the Ph.D. in Counseling and Supervision. A Licensed Professional Counselor/Mental Health Service Provider in Tennessee, he is also a Registered Play Therapist-Supervisor and an Approved Clinical Supervisor. With over two decades of clinical experience, his research focuses on attachment, mental health interventions, and student well-being. Dr. Michael has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and academic texts across counseling, education, and psychology. He has chaired doctoral dissertations and master's theses and served on multiple research committees. He is an active presenter at international, national, regional, and state conferences, as well as invited workshops and trainings. As a research advisor, he has mentored students in presenting their work, with several earning recognition for their contributions. Committed to advancing the field, he integrates research, clinical practice, and mentorship to support the next generation of counselors and scholars.

Katherine M. Hermann-Turner, Ph.D., LPC, BC-TMH, NCC, is an Associate Professor at Tennessee Tech University. As a faculty member, she integrates her experiences as a counselor, mother, and researcher into graduate counseling courses. Her research focus is on caregiver support, maternal mental health, and qualitative methods through a Relational Cultural Theory lens. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in the state of Tennessee, a Board Certified TeleMental Health Provider (BC-TMH), and a Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC).

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review was to describe the research regarding parenting programs designed for incarcerated fathers. In doing so, this manuscript explores parenting programs and interventions specifically tailored to the needs of incarcerated fathers, with particular attention to those incorporating attachment-based approaches and play therapy. Findings in the literature suggested that play therapy as an intervention shows promise for improving the attachment style of parenting, current and post-incarceration. Further implications that include the potential for reducing recidivism and increasing parenting interventions during incarceration are discussed.

Keywords: Incarcerated Fathers, Parenting Programs, Re-Entry, Play Therapy, Post-Release

In the United States, more than 1.2 million individuals are incarcerated in federal and state prisons (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). Of these, 93% are males, and 43% identify as fathers (Carson & Kluckow, 2023; Ghandnoosh et al., 2021). Despite a decrease of 16,800 individuals in state and federal prison populations in 2020, local jails experienced an increase of 87,200 incarcerations in 2021, resulting in a five % rise in the overall number of incarcerated persons. Licensed professional counselors, psychologists, faith-based organizations, re-entry coordinators, and correctional staff members work collaboratively at the local, state, and federal levels to support incarcerated individuals most effectively (Lasher & Stinson, 2020; Kamin et al., 2022). These counselors are often responsible for providing both individual and group counseling, working collaboratively with correctional staff, and modifying treatment approaches to fit the constraints of the institutional environment during incarceration (Kratcoski, 2024).

Additionally, programs intend to mend and build family relationships post-release (Tadros et al., 2020). Incarceration and the impact of the family unit on incarcerated individuals remain a topic of consideration for counselors who also serve to support other incarcerated offenders. In addition, upon release from a correctional setting, counselors who seek to help mend and build relationships are tasked with a particularly difficult challenge. The ongoing increase in male incarceration rates has significant consequences for families, especially in the absence of a father figure. According to Travis et al. (2014), incarceration adversely affects family dynamics by intensifying feelings of grief and the loss of the paternal head.

Throughout the literature, fatherhood is defined in various ways. While fatherhood is a complex and multifaceted construct, for the purposes of this review, a father is defined as a male individual who is legally or socially responsible for the well-being of a minor. Charles et al. (2019) discussed fathers providing financial support, as well as emotional and relational support to their children.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the parenting programs currently in use. At the same time, fathers are incarcerated and explore a conceptual framework for relevant and post-incarceration parenting programs that use play therapy as the primary intervention for increased attachment style. To contribute to the knowledge base supporting fathers and their families, this literature review examines the following questions: What is the connection between parenting programs and recidivism, attachment style, and warmth? Next, how do these programs impact the father-child relationship of incarcerated and post-incarcerated fathers? Lastly, how do

play therapy-based interventions, particularly Theraplay and filial therapy, impact the parenting abilities and father-child relationships of current and post-incarcerated fathers?

The Complexity of Parental Incarceration

Parental incarceration is a complex social issue with profound implications for families (Purvis, 2013). The challenges of incarcerated fathers in maintaining meaningful connections with their children continue to garner increased attention in academic and policy circles (Travis et al., 2014). Understanding research on parenting programs post-incarceration is a step toward comprehending the reality of these programs and recognizing the positive impact of fatherhood.

Recognizing the significance of maintaining parent-child relationships during incarceration, parenting programs emerge as fundamental interventions. These programs equip incarcerated fathers with the requisite skills and knowledge for effective parenting, fostering a positive environment for family reintegration upon release (Loper et al., 2019; Wildeman, 2010). Counseling alone has been helpful in the overall increase of wellness amongst clients of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, religious beliefs, and gender identities. The inclusion of mental health services for incarcerated populations has created discussion for policymakers and professional counselors. In understanding the impact of services, policymakers are beginning to recognize the pivotal role fathers play in the successful reintegration into society; this knowledge breaks the cycle of intergenerational involvement with the criminal justice system and supports the overall reduction of recidivism. The societal and familial consequences of parental imprisonment are substantial, and understanding the dynamics of effective interventions is crucial in supporting the multifaceted needs of this vulnerable population.

Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Individuals

Historically, incarceration programming has concentrated on addiction treatment, academic success, religious motivation, and workforce development (Said & Butler, 2023). The lack of focus on re-entry results in a gap within the family unit. As parental incarceration rates rise, trends in low educational attainment, increased adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), heightened depression, and criminal involvement start to affect the children of the incarcerated (Martin, 2017). Although incarceration creates unique circumstances that can influence the effectiveness of programming, the literature indicates a positive impact associated with parental education.

Parenting programs provided during incarceration can have long-term effects on parental outcomes that promote successful re-entry behaviors (Armstrong et al., 2017). In order to target challenges, incarcerated fathers complete parenting programs post-release, improving parenting knowledge and skills, as well as improving their overall well-being. Many states and countries discovering the increased need to target this key deficiency in post-release fathers show promising results in reducing recidivism rates among incarcerated fathers as well as improving parent-child bonding (Muentner & Charles, 2019). Moreover, these programs indicate the potential to enhance incarcerated fathers' involvement in their children's lives and increase their awareness of children's development (Dill et al., 2016).

Using the term "multimodal" parenting program, Muentner and Charles (2019) suggested that a broader concept of a parenting program may be helpful. These programs address the numerous contextual issues that parents of children involved in the corrections system encounter, both during and after incarceration. The programs aim to develop a range of parenting knowledge bases and skill sets. Additionally, Muentner and Charles (2019) discuss the need for engaging in multimodal programming to enhance parenting skills and family connections during the initial release period. In examining the need for interventions, it is valuable to understand the existing narratives contributing to a father's motivation.

Schultz et al. (2021) identify particular paternal narratives that molded fathers' identities and behaviors while incarcerated. The identified narratives include redemption, rejection, and reconciliation. Fathers may use narratives and stories to help them cope with the hardships of being incarcerated, defend their actions, explain their decisions and actions, navigate the prison environment and culture, and/or achieve their social and personal objectives. These stories may have an impact on the fathers' decision to abstain from crime, their reintegration into society, and their interactions with their families and children after their release (Schultz et al., 2021).

Charles et al. (2021) described the first year after incarceration, noting that parental participation levels tend to be the highest during this period. During the initial release year, individuals are most involved with post-release obligations, such as maintaining employment, checking in with parole officers, and maintaining a desire for family involvement. Similarly, Turney (2020), in a Jail and Family Life Study (a qualitative, long-term study), discussed the complex and contrasting ways in which father imprisonment generates, upholds, and intensifies disparities within families and children. When combined, these data collection efforts contribute to the increasing body of research on the collateral effects of imprisonment by exploring how fathers and their families become impacted by the cycle of jail time, incarceration, and release.

Methods

A comprehensive search strategy for potential articles included electronic searches using Google Scholar, Connected Papers, LitMaps, PsychINFO, PsychArticles, and EBSCOhost. Search terms were identified across four key content areas: fathers, incarceration, play therapy, and parenting. Various combinations of the following terms were explored: incarcerated father and parenting programs, parenting programs, interventions, and incarceration. Relevant terms pertaining to incarceration, fathers, and parenting were examined together, while those specifically related to incarcerated fathers and parenting programs were analyzed as a pair. Each database was searched independently using the comprehensive search strategy. The data across these studies were synthesized based on their content. Identified trends included parenting programs, reduction of recidivism, and positive effects.

Synthesis of Literature

The articles meeting the criteria were synthesized into Excel and categorized by author's name, article title, publication year, journal, grouping identifier, summary, methodology, findings, and comments. Articles were then removed if, upon review, they did not meet the criteria for

relevancy. The remaining articles were reviewed, and relevant articles and themes were identified and used for this peer-reviewed journal study.

Parenting Programs and Recidivism

Gonzalez et al. (2007) found that increased knowledge of parenting practices benefits participants by decreasing their chances of recidivism. Additional studies of parenting programs indicate reduced recidivism rates for individuals who participated in a parenting program while incarcerated (Eddy et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2021). Incarceration in America is an increasing problem. Recidivism, though a complex issue with an interplay of risk factors, can be reduced with appropriate intervention. In recognizing the intricacies of reducing recidivism, highlighting the positive impact of parenting programs becomes imperative in identifying parent-child risk factors independently (Hall, 2015). Of the incarcerated individuals who participated in parenting programs while incarcerated, participants noted increased parenting skills and the likelihood of reducing other harmful behaviors. Moore and Clement (1998) demonstrated that participation in parenting programs increased knowledge of positive parenting attitudes.

Robbers' (2008) longitudinal study asserted that the father-involvement curriculum has a positive influence on fathers' involvement with their children. Robbers (2008) discussed foundational principles that derive from Prochaska's Transtheoretical Model of Change. The model's structure describes the behaviors of change and measures an individual's readiness to change through cyclical assessment. With higher levels of involvement, a correlation between recidivism reduction and the reduction of other maladaptive behaviors begins to emerge. Charles et al. (2021) found that father-child involvement during incarceration led to higher levels of involvement after release.

Armstrong and colleagues (2017) reviewed 11 studies that evaluated prison-based programs for parents and found a positive correlation with prison-based programs that decreased rates of recidivism among fathers. Additionally, Tadros and Tor (2022) assert that fathers with more positive attitudes toward fatherhood tended to show more positive outcomes related to familial closeness and bonding. Furthermore, parenting programs not only indicate a vital role in recidivism reduction rates but also have positive effects on paternal social skills, mental health, and parental warmth and attachment (Loper et al., 2019)

Attachment Style and Warmth

Existing literature describes the correlation between the need for parenting programs and the impact of a father's absence on parent-child relationships. The attachment styles of incarcerated fathers can show significant implications for their children's development. Kanaboshi et al. (2017) assert that parenting programs in prison indicate the potential to positively impact incarcerated fathers' attachment styles and strengthen their relationships with their children. Fairchild (2009) discusses the correlation between fathers' attachment styles and their attitudes towards involved and warm parenting styles. Fairchild suggested the usefulness of an attachment theory framework for targeting the needs of incarcerated fathers and their families. Fairchild also described that the majority of participants exhibited insecure or unresolved attachment styles due

to experiences within their parental relationships. Distinctive concerns and challenges for incarcerated fathers exist, such as separation, lack of clarity around parenting practices, and uncertainty about their children's safety while imprisoned (Armstrong et al., 2017). Understanding the influence of parenting styles on parent-child interactions remains crucial. Prior research studies on attachment styles have shown that a more secure attachment style is a significant predictor of emotional intelligence (Tadros & Tor, 2022).

Kamptner (2017) describes the efficacy of an attachment-informed parenting program approach. Findings demonstrate that parenting knowledge and skills surrounding child development and appropriate boundary setting significantly improve parental satisfaction and diminish distress related to parenting. These findings indicate that fathers who have experienced incarceration could benefit from an attachment-based parenting program.

Play Therapy in Parenting Programs for Incarcerated Fathers

Play therapy is a developmentally appropriate and evidence-informed modality that fosters emotional expression, enhances relational attunement, and supports attachment processes in young children (Ray et al., 2015). For incarcerated fathers who face significant challenges in fulfilling traditional parenting roles, play therapy-based interventions provide an alternative mechanism to maintain and strengthen parent-child bonds (Bratton et al., 2005; Bratton & Landreth, 2006). Arditti (2012) discussed the inclusion of relationally oriented interventions within correctional parenting programs, finding that these interventions not only addressed the emotional needs of children but also led to increases in paternal self-efficacy, empathic capacity, and the father's identity as a caregiver.

Theraplay, an attachment-focused intervention rooted in attachment theory and neurodevelopmental science, represents a prominent model within play-based interventions. It uses structured, joyful, and developmentally attuned play to strengthen parent-child relationships (Booth & Jernberg, 2010). Theraplay emphasizes four key components of healthy caregiver-child interaction, including Structure, Engagement, Nurture, and Challenge (Jernberg & Booth, 2001). Money and colleagues (2021) note how Theraplay successfully adapts for high-risk families, including those affected by trauma, separation, or systemic barriers to secure attachment.

In correctional settings, Theraplay-informed interventions often require creative adaptations to target the unique challenges of these environments. Examples of adaptations include guided letter-writing with narrative reflection, role-playing with puppets, or using symbolic toys and video modeling. Additionally, therapeutic contact visits are incorporated to foster emotional connection. These methods aim to evoke attunement and emotional resonance, even when direct physical access to children is limited (Cassidy et al., 2013).

A growing body of research supports the integration of play-based modalities in parenting programs for incarcerated populations. Meta-analytic studies describe child-centered play therapy and filial therapy, where parents are coached in structured play techniques, resulting in improved parent-child relationships and reductions in externalizing behaviors among children (Bratton et al., 2005; Lin & Bratton, 2015). Findings indicate these approaches also link to

decreased parenting stress and increased emotional responsiveness among mothers, even in the face of adversity such as the father's incarceration (Arditti & Few, 2006). Brown and Gibbons (2017) demonstrate child-centered play therapy (CCPT) as a developmentally sensitive and emotionally responsive method for addressing the complex needs of children affected by parental incarceration. Their case illustration shows the effectiveness of CCPT in helping children process ambiguous loss, enhance coping skills, and rebuild emotional security in the context of disrupted attachment relationships.

Filial therapy, in particular, proves beneficial for both incarcerated mothers and fathers. Harris and Landreth (1997) found that a five-week filial therapy program with incarcerated mothers significantly improves empathic behaviors, parental acceptance, and reduced stress related to parenting. In a similar study with incarcerated fathers, Landreth and Lobaugh (1998) demonstrate that a 10-week filial therapy program significantly enhances paternal acceptance and empathic behaviors while reducing both parenting stress and child behavior problems. Moreover, children of fathers who participated in this program show significant improvements in self-concept, suggesting the potential for relational repair and child development through structured filial play sessions.

Supporting these findings, a recent scoping review by Stewart and Parson (2024) synthesized research on therapeutic play-based interventions for children aged two to 12 years experiencing the effects of parental incarceration. The review identified several interventions, including filial therapy, child-centered play therapy, narrative therapy, and bibliotherapy; the programs yielded positive outcomes for children's emotional well-being, particularly in the face of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief. Despite the limited number of studies that met inclusion criteria, the review emphasizes the consistent benefits of these interventions across various cultural and disciplinary contexts. Stewart and Parson (2024) strongly advocated for the integration of these modalities into social services and correctional programming while also calling for more rigorous research to confirm their long-term efficacy.

Despite the promising outcomes of these interventions, several barriers remain in implementing them within correctional settings. Many institutions lack trained mental health counselors, as well as policies governing visitation and programming, which may limit opportunities for direct parent-child engagement (Schlafer et al., 2020). However, recent innovations demonstrated the feasibility of implementing play-based interventions in correctional settings. For example, some could conceptualize that virtual play sessions, pre-recorded story guides, and staff-facilitated play kits could allow for scalable interventions in these environments. Additionally, Eddy et al. (2013) indicated that parenting curricula incorporating developmentally appropriate play materials and emotional education yield positive outcomes for incarcerated fathers and their families.

In summary, play therapy (particularly Theraplay-informed and filial therapy approaches) offers a developmentally grounded and relationally restorative strategy for supporting incarcerated fathers in their parenting role. When embedded within broader psychoeducational parenting programs, these interventions provide fathers with tangible skills to support their children's emotional needs and sustain secure attachment relationships. Filial therapy interventions, where fathers learn child-centered play techniques, are especially effective when applied in contact

visits or through alternative symbolic engagement methods such as storytelling, letter-writing, or puppet-based communication. These approaches enable fathers to connect with their children's emotional worlds and to experience themselves as emotionally responsive caregivers, even within the constraints of the correctional environment. Integrating relationally attuned play-based interventions into correctional parenting programs contributed not only to improved child outcomes but also served as a protective factor in post-release family functioning and reduced recidivism (Landreth & Bratton, 2006). Although challenges such as systemic barriers and resource limitations persist, emerging adaptations, such as training correctional staff in foundational play therapy techniques and developing low-resource therapeutic tools, suggest that broader implementation is achievable. Therefore, play therapy is considered a vital component of holistic, attachment-focused parenting programs for individuals involved in the justice system.

Future Directions/Limitations

The literature describing incarcerated fathers and parenting programs is gaining considerable attention, as well as highlighting implications for mental health advocacy. However, there are still relatively few studies on attachment style, parenting programs, and post-release fatherhood. In addition, several methodological limitations limit the generalizability of findings about this vulnerable population. First, it is important for individual state legislation “to frame buy-in” policy to create substantial change. In order to reintegrate fathers back into the community, a broader view is considered; reconsidering changes to the ways incarceration is viewed in the community and the associated stigmas and attitudes towards those convicted become critical (Looby et al., 2022).

Second, current literature focuses on parenting programs implemented during incarceration. Most of these programs focus on the mothering role rather than the paternal role. Additionally, the parenting programs have been evaluated in studies that last no longer than six months. While most studies indicate positive impacts, conclusions can only be drawn about specific periods of incarceration in relation to attitudes and efficacy after re-entry.

Third, most of the existing literature points to the significant impact of incarceration on minoritized populations. In contrast, this current literature review provides a broad overview of the impact on fathers from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Much of the existing literature studies consider the most significant impact among African American males.

Fourth, a review of the existing literature did not describe the implications of mental health impacts and the attachment styles of the father based on the experiences within their family dynamic. Understanding the multi-generational impact of incarcerated fathers may uncover unhealthy attachment styles that exist within other significant relationships. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future studies to investigate these potential correlations.

Fifth, future studies may examine the correlation between international data to provide information about the cultural contexts that support parenting programs, furthering the examination of policy change. Theoretical frameworks that explain current findings suggest directions for future research and would add significantly to the literature for counselors, social workers, and mental health advocates when working with incarcerated fathers reintegrating into

society (Barlow & Coren, 2017; Daniels, 2023; Kamptner, 2017). In the proposal of a parenting program for post-incarceration, it is vital to understand the impact of incarceration on fathers and families and the most advantageous time to implement interventions in order to ensure continual improvement (Eddy et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This literature review describes the impacts of incarceration on fathers, families, and children. Additionally, the possible advantages of parenting programs for improving their relationships were discussed, such as the function of attachment style in forming the father-child relationship and the difficulties of sustaining safe attachment while incarcerated. Incarceration disrupts the father-child connection, which can lead to insecure or disordered attachment. The review identified several gaps and limitations in the existing literature, including deficiencies in longitudinal and randomized controlled studies, the diversity and quality of parenting programs, the measurement and operationalization of attachment style, and the consideration of contextual and individual factors that may influence parenting program outcomes.

Consequently, future research targeting these concerns would provide more rigorous and thorough information on the efficacy and mechanisms of parenting programs for incarcerated fathers and their children. This current review suggests implications for policymakers and practitioners to encourage the creation and implementation of evidence-based attachment-emphasized play therapy parenting programs targeted to the needs and problems of incarcerated fathers, children, and the family unit. By doing so, this review aimed to contribute to the advancement of research and practice in imprisonment, parenting, and attachment, as well as to improve the well-being and opportunities of fathers, children, and families affected by incarceration.

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