Parenting Programs in NSW Women’s Correctional Centres

Deidre Hyslop
Deidre Hyslop is the Principal Advisor Women Offenders
NSW Department of Corrective Services

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of parenting services and programs for incarcerated women and their children in NSW. These programs are based on recognition of the importance of the parent/child relationship and the necessity to support and strengthen these relationships to withstand the negative impact of incarceration and the rigours of transition and resettlement in the community. In its Mothers and Children’s Policy the NSW Department of Corrective Services acknowledges that imprisonment is not evidence of a mother’s lack of desire or ability to perform her parental duties and recognises that addressing children’s separation issues will lessen negative long-term damage to their health and behaviour. Assisting the establishment or maintaining relationships between children and their incarcerated fathers is also recognised as important and the Department has established services and programs to support parent/child relationships.

Services

The services include telephone and postage subsidies, facilities in each correctional centre for visits, some with children’s play equipment. A number of community-based organisations are funded to provide ongoing services. These include the Community Restorative Centre which provides support for families during the period of incarceration of a family member and for twelve months following release. SHINE For Kids provides facilitated playgroups in some correctional centres, a transport service to take children to visit their incarcerated parent in circumstances where a carer is unable or unwilling to take them.

Programs

Programs specific to the male offender population are not included in this paper which focuses on programs for women.

Parenting programs for women vary in level of contact facilitated between parent and child, from full-time residency to long distance video-assisted “visits”. The programs are:

- Mothering at a Distance
- Mothers and Children’s Program – Full-Time Residency Program, Occasional Residency Program, Local Leave Permits
- Video Visits
- Dillwynia TV “in-cell” TV channel.

Participants in these programs may also be women who are primary carers, such as grandmothers and aunts.

Mothering at a Distance

Background

The Mothering at a Distance Program has been a joint project between the Department of Corrective Services (DCS) and Tresillian Family Care Centres in NSW, funded through the Australian Government’s National Community Crime Prevention Program.

Positive evaluation responses and suggestions from mothers and staff following the implementation of a mother infant relationship group program, Mothering from Inside, in 2004 led to discussion around the need for a program that would enhance the mother/child experience during their time together at visits. Rather than a parenting program, it was felt that working with the mothers and children during visit time would be an effective way for improving mothering skills and understanding of child development and needs.
During and after completion of the initial program significant improvement was noticed by staff in the behaviour of mothers towards their infants. The participants made more timely, appropriate and sensitive responses to their children. The program had targeted high-risk parents who had histories of contact with the NSW Department of Community Services whose children had been removed for long or short periods of time as a result of drug use, domestic violence, neglect and abuse as well as issues relating to separation. The women participated at the end of their custodial term prior to their release dates. The program was supported by funds from the NSW Department of Women – Women’s Grants Program.

**Development of Mothering at a Distance Program**

During development of the program, to ensure that it met the women’s and children’s needs and conformed to departmental requirements, a range of activities occurred:

- An Advisory Group was established with major input from the University of Technology Sydney Tresillian Chair of Child and Family Health
- Approval of the DCS Research and Ethics Committee was received
- A Research Advisory Group was formed
- Women offenders were consulted and discussions of their learning needs as mothers took place as part of pre group data collection. A learning/parenting needs audit was undertaken
- Consultation with UTS Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning concerning the appropriateness of the program and evaluation strategy for Aboriginal women took place. Support was given and ongoing consultation offered
- An evaluation strategy was developed with input from the DCS Corporate Research and Statistics Branch and approval received from UTS and Justice Health
- As part of the evaluation process liaison with Macquarie University was established for development of scenarios to be used to test maternal changes in sensitivity and learning.

**Objectives of the Program**

The program’s stated objectives are to:

1. Reduce distress caused by separation due to incarceration of female offenders who are mothers or primary carers of young children
2. Reduce trauma among young children caused by separation and visits to their mothers in prison settings
3. Break intergenerational cycles of crime by enabling women, in brief contact periods with their children, to develop strategies to:
   - enhance mother/child relationship
   - increase maternal sensitivity and appropriate responses to infant’s signals
   - build maternal and infant strengths
   - increase mother’s knowledge and skills to care for her infant to enhance positive impact of existing care-giving patterns and behaviours
   - reduce negative (punitive) parenting interactions
   - develop pro social pay skills and behaviour management.
4. Develop, implement and evaluate an education and support program for staff who will act as facilitators for the education/therapeutic interventions.

The Program is for incarcerated mothers or primary carers whose children visit them in custody. The project used approaches that focus on:

- Early intervention by working with mothers as soon as possible after their reception into custody
- Development of relationships by drawing on principles of attachment and promotion of responsive, appropriate and sensitive mothering by modelling behaviours and attitudes
- Development of parenting and child strengths to promote a positive attitude to parenting, increase mother and child resilience and competence.
The Program’s structure
The Program consists of three major components as well as purpose-developed resources and staff training:

**Mothering at a Distance Orientation Program** for women in custody who have a child or children 0-5 years. This is a session of information-giving about the program and about parenting, growth and development, children, discipline and separation anxiety.

**Supported Play Group** entitled Stay and Play, held at the beginning of visit periods to provide:
- a familiar, enjoyable routine at beginning of each visit
- activities to assist mothers to learn appropriate development expectations for their children
- opportunities for facilitators to model appropriate, timely and sensitive responses to the children and their mothers
- encouragement to develop maternal insight into the children’s experience of interactions and events.

**Mothers Group to develop:**
- maternal insights and experience
- non-punitive approaches to child discipline
- relationship skills
- identification and reinforcement of relationship skills
- positive experiences and insights gained from participating in the structured play program.

Development of educational and information resources for mothers includes pamphlets on what to expect from a child during visits, strategies to use with children at visiting time, at the end of visiting time to make parting easier and at release, to make the transition easier.

**Evaluation**
Evaluation of the program’s effectiveness is integral to the project. A researcher has been employed since the commencement of the project in 2007 and will complete a report in mid-2009. Mid-term evaluation indicates that the program is highly effective in terms of the Department’s criteria; the program has achieved a high score on DCS framework for effectiveness of programs. The research has used appreciative enquiry methodology which identifies the positive rather than what is not effective.

**Addressing intergenerational offending**
In addition to improving the mother/child relationship and mothering skills of participants through enhancement of the enjoyment and benefits of visits, the program was underpinned by international research that shows the critical importance of early parenting relationships in transmission of intergenerational violence. The establishment of early attachment between child and parent is the foundation of the child’s future development and social adjustment. If parenting problems are left untreated they create increased demand for services and costs to address health and welfare issues, education deficits, juvenile offending and child protection.

The Mothering at a Distance Program has been accepted by the DCS Offender Programs Unit as an approved program.

**Mothers and Children’s Program**
Addressing the specific needs of children of incarcerated women is the express focus of the Program.

The Mothers and Children’s Program has three components:

**Local Leave Permits** enabling the mother of young children to serve her custodial sentence with her children in the community under defined and binding supervision conditions.

**Occasional Residency Program** at Jacaranda Cottages at Emu Plains and the Parramatta Transitional Centre where children up to and including the age of 12 can stay with their mothers for specified periods during weekends and school holidays.

**Full-time Residency Program** at the same centres, pre-school aged children can reside full-time with their
mothers/primary carers whilst they serve their time in custody.

Local Leave Permits
Under the *Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Act Section 26 Local Leave Permits*, women sentenced to full-time custody who have dependent pre-school aged children may be permitted to serve their sentences in the community if this is deemed to be in the best interests of their child or children. Local Leave Permits have been an option for incarcerated mothers since the 1980s, following the closure of a Women and Babies Unit at the then main women’s correctional centre, Mulawa.

The Women and Babies Unit had operated from 1979 to 1981 for women offenders and their pre-school aged children, and was closed on Christmas Eve 1981 by the then Minister for Corrective Services, the Hon. John Akister. While on a visit to the correctional centre the Minister was disturbed to see children leaning out through the bars; he felt strongly that prisons were unsuitable environments for children. The Women in Prison Task Force was established to undertake a thorough examination of the appropriateness and adequacy of custodial facilities and their conditions for women in NSW and to make recommendations to the government on the most appropriate custodial and non-custodial options. Research, community consultation and development of policy recommendations in the areas of diversion, accommodation, drug dependence and remand prisoners were also part of their brief. The resulting *Women in Prison Report 1985* was instrumental in the establishment of a women’s classification system and the constitution of a Women’s Council to assist in implementation of the Task Force recommendations.

In 1986 the state labour government amended the *Prisons Act 1952* to enable the Corrective Services Commissioner to grant permission for individual inmates to be absent from a correctional centre for specified periods. To address the issue of the best interests of the children, focus was switched to alternatives to custody and Local Leave Permits for women were established.

The 1986 amendment Second Reading Speech refers specifically to the use of Local Leave Permits for women who give birth while in custody. On the birth of their children women were transferred from custody to full-time accommodation in a half-way house or rehabilitation centre. Two of the three centres received funding through the Corrective Services Community Funding Scheme. Women with existing drug issues could participate in residential rehabilitation programs with their children in the community. The well-being of the children was the important factor.

With the change of government in March 1988 came the opportunity to overturn the amendment and restrict leave permits for prisoners including women in the community under Section 29(2)©. This did not occur and the Section remained in force. Following later amendments to other sections of the *Crimes (Administration of Sentences) Act Section 29(2)©* became Section 26(2)(l).

Occasional-Residency Program
This program is available to women who:

- are pregnant and their confinement date occurs while they are serving a custodial term
- have children up to and including the age of six (the statutory age for children to be enrolled in kindergarten in NSW is six years of age)
- have children up to and including the age of twelve.

Infants and children may reside with their mothers or primary carers on an occasional basis, i.e. weekend and school holidays for children older than six years, and mid-week, weekend and school holidays for infants and children younger than six years. Participation is assessed on a case by case basis to ensure the best interests of children are met.

Full-time Residency Program
This is available to women who are pregnant and their confinement date occurs while they are serving a custodial term or women who have infants and/or...
children up to and including the age of six years. The statutory age for children to be enrolled in kindergarten in NSW is six years of age. Infants and children reside with their mother/primary carer on a full-time basis. Women may also sign their children out to stay over night and for weekends with their fathers or other family members so the children have the opportunity to participate in family and social events and to develop relationships with significant others.

The Mothers and Children’s Program operates at Jacaranda Cottages, Emu Plains Correctional Centre and at the Parramatta Transitional Centre. Caring for a child while serving a custodial term does not prevent a mother from engaging in other programs for which she has been assessed. The children also continue to participate in community activities such as swimming, community play groups, library visits and picnics in parks. Older children participate in school holiday activities such as going to the cinema and nearby aquatic centre.

Issues
In assessing women and children to participate it is hard to keep the focus on the best interests of the child. Security issues arising in relation to the mother/carer may override the children’s well-being. Applications are assessed by the Mothers and Children’s Committee which makes recommendations for the Commissioner’s final decision.

Another issue is the women’s classification level. Those at the lower levels of classification are able to participate. Category 1 women are able to travel alone to agreed destinations with their children and/or to attend pre-natal appointments. Category 2 women (the most numerous in the women’s system) are required to be accompanied by an officer of the Department. Staffing levels and other centre-based needs may override the needs of one or two participants.

Video Visits Program
Successful use of video technology enabling long-distance court appearances for inmates in remote correctional centres prompted a suggestion from SHINE for Kids to provide opportunities for families to have video visits with their incarcerated family member. Access to the service has been supported by DCS and collaboration with SHINE For Kids has been established. The video conferences are for families who live considerable distances from correctional centres and find it hard to visit their incarcerated family member due to distance, transport issues, financial hardship, illness and disability.

SHINE For Kids liaise with correctional centres, the family and the video conferencing site to arrange the video visit which is a link-up between the mother (or father) and children.

In the beginning the program was well received however the need to rebuild relationships via new technology was a challenge. Children’s short attention spans made it difficult for them to focus for an entire hour. The project team looked for ways to keep their attention. The homework initiative emerged, giving the parents a point of connection.

For one family, the conferencing site is a doctor’s office near their home, a six-hour drive from the correctional centre in which their mother is located. Sensing her high school aged son’s anxiety about his school work the incarcerated mother suggested that they work on it together. SHINE For Kids were able to enlist the cooperation of the boy’s school which provided a copy of the relevant curriculum for the mother’s reference. Regular link ups have proved very successful for the younger children in the family who also work with their mum on their homework. “We started on the foundation of doing homework together and it gave my son and me an opportunity to form a bond between each other where he could let me know the things he was doing, the things he appreciated in life and who his friends were in real time. He could see me and he could see I was OK. I think for children whose mothers are in custody when they get to see their mum face-to-face and see that mum is OK, it settles them to a level that they can be OK and they can get on with their own lives”. (“A
mother’s tough assignment’ Sydney Morning Herald 22 Nov 2007)

**Dillwynia in-cell TV Channel**

A further application of technology to assist families has “gone live” in the past week. In November 2007 Dillwynia, one of the four designated women’s centres in NSW, launched its in-cell TV station, a first in the state. The channel provides inmates with access to information and news seven days a week. The goal is to attract inmates to watch DTV by providing them with appropriate guidance and advice to help them make the most of their time in custody and to assist them with their transition back to the community. DVDs, made by the Department's Audio-Visual Production Unit and other bodies such as Legal Aid, are screened. A TV Guide is displayed around the centre. External agencies have been invited to take advantage of the new communication network to have their information disseminated to the women.

**References**


Tomaino, J., Ryan, S., Markotić, S. & Gladwell, J. (June 2005) *Children of Prisoners Project*. Justice Strategy Division, Attorney General’s Department, South Australia


