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Article

The role of parenting classes for young fathers in prison: A case study

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Abstract This article considers the role of parenting classes for young men in prison. Using a case study of one course delivered at a young offender institution, significant aspects of the content and delivery are identified. The ways in which this course appears to contribute to the growth of participants' understanding of their role as fathers and to their personal development are highlighted.

Keywords children, fathers, parenting courses, prisons, young offenders

Parenting courses are being increasingly used in a range of contexts. They are used by the youth justice system for parents of children in trouble, by health service workers to support teenage parents, and by government cross-departmental strategies, such as the Sure Start programme, to support parents of young children in deprived areas (Glass, 1999; Freely, 2000). In prisons the emphasis on rehabilitation programmes, such as those designed to address offending behaviour and develop life skills, has increased and this has included the provision of parenting classes. In 2001 only four institutions holding young male offenders did not have, or were not planning to run, parenting classes (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). Parenting classes could be seen as encouraging the young men involved to develop their role in a family network, which may reduce the likelihood of offending. They may be important, also, for the children of these young men, who with a parent in prison are statistically more likely to offend themselves. Erratic and harsh parenting are factors which may lead to offending (Sutton, 2002) and as this has been the experience of many young men in prison they are likely to repeat this with their own children. Parenting classes may make a contribution to the halting of this cycle.

Evaluations undertaken of parenting classes in prisons have shown results to

be positive in relation to the extent that knowledge of the material involved is retained over a period of time and to expressed changes in attitudes to aspects of parenting. Thompson and Harm (2000), in a detailed American case study of a 15-week parenting course in a women's prison, found that significant changes in expressed views on discipline were evident, the women involved moving from previous use of physical punishment to planned use of more nurturing methods. Dennison and Lyon's (2001) study of outcomes of a sample of parenting courses for young men in UK young offender institutions recorded that participants reported positively on the courses, retained information that had been learnt and many reported a change in attitude to their roles as fathers. Additionally, some young men report that attending parenting classes helped them to understand their partner's situation better (Katz, 2002).

This case study of one parenting course in a young offender institution (YOI) explores issues related to the content and delivery of the course. This is important as current initiatives to increase and develop parenting courses in prisons require an understanding of what needs to be included in relation to content, and how courses can be delivered effectively. A range of current initiatives such as the 'Family Man' course developed by staff and prisoners in a number of institutions (Safe Ground, 2002) are encouraging institutions to share practice, but Dennison and Lyon (2001) note that providers of parenting courses in YOIs tend to work in isolation and do not have links with other providers, nor do they have a forum for sharing information and training. Reading about the work of others developing courses in similar contexts can encourage the sharing of ideas and practice.

The context

Aylesbury YOI caters for young men between the ages of 17 and 21. A parenting course was started there in 1997. The course is available to all inmates who express a wish to attend, unless the nature of their offence precludes participation. They do not have to be fathers but many have at least one child. The course is very popular, there is often a waiting list, and two classes are run in parallel to cater for the numbers involved. The study describes both the content of the course and the mode of delivery, and attempts to identify significant aspects of each.

Data for this study were collected by means of the observation of identified sessions approximately six-weekly over a period of 18 months. Observations were focused on the response of students to the modes of delivery of the course. This was identified by noting: listening behaviour, time on task, engagement with the material and spoken contributions by individuals. Students were also asked to complete end of session and end of course evaluations. Documentation related to the course was scrutinized and staff teaching the course were interviewed in relation to their approaches to teaching and learning. Written consent was obtained from participants to have their contributions quoted and examples are included in the text from participants on this course.

The course content

The course, entitled 'Parentcraft', is part of a social and life skills programme and is validated by the Open College. It consists of 16-weekly, three-hour sessions. Course completion results in a level 1 or level 2 certificate, depending on the type and level of assessment undertaken. The certificate element is important to students taking the course, many of whom have no educational qualifications. The students completing the course often ask for their certificates to be sent home so that they do not get lost in any prison transfers. This pride in their achievement mirrors that found by other researchers who report certificates being sent home to be displayed (McDermott and King, 1992).

The course involves sessions on contraception and sexual health; pregnancy and birth; children's development between birth and five years, the role of the adult in supporting children's development; the role of the father; listening to children; managing behaviour; safety and first aid, and the responsibilities of parents, including financial and legal responsibilities. The course is adapted to meet the needs of fathers who have very young children, or young men who are likely to become fathers. It therefore focuses on the needs of children under the age of five, although parenting of other age groups is discussed. Discussion about parenting teenagers raises interesting issues for students who are teenagers themselves.

With the current emphasis on reducing the number of teenage pregnancies, the session on contraception and sexual health is clearly important. Many students feel knowledgeable in this area but in fact may have fairly limited knowledge:

> . . . there was a lot of stuff I thought I knew but I learnt a lot more today. (Jason, aged 19)

While some students will have attended the birth of their child many will have been prevented from doing so by their current or previous custodial sentences. In addition to factual information about pregnancy and birth, this session also looks at emotional issues and at the needs of the mother and the role of the father at this time. For young teenage fathers, not just those in prison, the relationship with their partner at this time can be fraught with difficulties. This was expressed clearly by disadvantaged young men interviewed for The Prince's Trust (2001). Developing an understanding of others' perspectives could contribute to easing some of these problems.

A significant amount of time on the course is spent exploring children's development between birth and five years, the age range of most of the students' children. The emphasis is on learning about all aspects of development and specifically the role of the adult in supporting children's learning. The crucial importance of appropriate adult–child interaction at this stage of development is explained and strategies and resources explored through practical activities. Students often know very little about children's development and are amazed by their abilities:

> I didn't know how advanced in communication babies are. (Peter, aged 20)

> I didn't know that kids were learning when they were playing and I was very surprised. (Ahmed, aged 19)

> Today I learnt about things like eye contact and responding to a child and how to recognize how they're coming along with their speech and how to communicate. (Ray, aged 19)

> I didn't know kids were so clever. (Sean, aged 18)

Fathers in general spend proportionally more time playing with their children than do mothers, engaging in physical play particularly (Golombok, 2000). The course looks at a range of play opportunities that can arise and how fathers can use these appropriately. Suitable toys for different age groups are identified and the use of everyday materials for physical and imaginative play is explored. Students appear to have limited experience, or certainly little memory, of playing with toys or games, and need opportunities to play with these themselves before considering how these could be used with young children. Playing picture lotto, for example, has been a favourite activity for all groups. This need for students to engage with play materials themselves has been found in other parenting courses in young offender institutions (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). It emphasizes the importance of practical activities and the time to undertake these in the delivery of parenting courses in this context. It also demonstrates the need for this aspect of the course, as fathers cannot be expected to engage in play with their children if they themselves have limited experience in this area.

Sharing books is also an activity that fathers and children can do together, but one which may have particular difficulties for young men with limited literacy. While some students on these courses will have a high level of literacy and confidence in handling books, for the majority of inmates in young offender institutions this will not be the case (Neustatter, 2002). Sharing books with children is included on a number of parenting courses in prison for a range of reasons, including the importance of this activity for children's language development and their later educational progress (Wells, 1986). Book sharing is an opportunity for physical closeness and the sharing of a focus of attention. It can lead to improved communication and the building of relationships. In Wymott adult prison, for example, a writer in residence funded by The National Literacy Trust facilitates the creating of stories by prisoners for their children which can then be written, illustrated, made into a book and also taped for use at home (Evans, 2002).

On the Aylesbury course, students explore books that can be used with babies and toddlers and practise the type of language and activities one can do with pop-up and lift-the-flap books. They practise telling stories from pictures, something that they often find difficult. Again this points to the importance of actually undertaking an activity rather than just talking about it. The students need this experience to be able to use books effectively and to appreciate their use. They also need the confidence to ignore words in the book if they find them difficult and to tell the story from the pictures. In students' minds books are generally associated with reading the words and other ways of using them need to be explored:

> I didn't see the point of people giving books to my baby, I thought she was too young. (Alan, aged 18)

> I didn't know you could give books to children who couldn't read. (Andy, aged 19)

Play activities that can be linked to stories are also undertaken, for example making puppets of the gingerbread man so that the story can be dramatized. Personalizing the story for the child is also practised, such as making the gingerbread man hide in the child's house or run down a road to the local park.

Students are encouraged to record themselves telling or reading stories so that their children can have the tapes. They are also encouraged to make up their own stories. This is a difficult thing to do but follows time spent looking at a range of children's books and considering their themes and topics. The students are always keen to have books read to them, perhaps reflecting a lack of this experience themselves. The caring relationship that can be developed through book sharing is identified. Students watch a home-made video of a father sharing a book with his two year old twin sons who are sitting on his lap. The quality of attention that all the students give to this example and subsequent discussion indicate that it is the quality of the relationship between the man and his children that is being appreciated. This gives an opportunity of talking about love and how it can be shown and developed, something that may be difficult to talk about in the environment of a male prison.

The concept of masculinity and how this relates to showing affection towards young children and engaging in what could be seen as traditional feminine activities in relation to child care may be an issue for many men (Lamb, 1997). It is particularly an area of concern for adolescents who are still developing their own adult male identity. This may result in young men being concerned to show that they do not exhibit any supposedly feminine characteristics, which could include being seen as sensitive and caring towards children (Marsiglio and Cohan, 1997). This is something that is discussed at an early stage on the course and continues throughout the programme, with video examples of men interacting with young children. These examples have to be carefully chosen as, if the men involved are not seen by the students as good male role models, they respond adversely to them. The example of high profile fathers, such as David Beckham, who show masculine skills in football but also sensitivity in caring for young children is very important to these students and is an aid to discussing the concept of fatherhood.

In addition to issues that will relate to all fathers, the course considers aspects that are particular to parents in prison, such as developing a relationship from a distance, suitable activities for visiting times and using the telephone. Some students do not see their children and may never see them:

> My girlfriend said that if I came back inside then I couldn't see my son again, so now I don't know if I'll ever see him again. (Stuart, aged 20)

A few students keep diaries which they may be able to show to their children at a later date to show that they were thinking about them even when they were not in contact. Some identify useful strategies for interaction during visits. One student, for example, was determined to always wear the same coloured jumper during visits so that his baby son would begin to recognize him.

The telephone is an important link with the family but children under five have difficulties with talking to people they can't see and with understanding what the other person knows. If students understand this then they are less likely to feel

rejected if phone conversations between them and their children are problematic. Phone calls between a student and his partner may take place fairly frequently and may therefore be a feature of a young child's life. The adults need to understand how this may affect a young child who suddenly is deprived of his mother's attention without warning. One student on the course had a two year old who would urinate on the carpet while his parents were on the phone. This infuriated his father who said that his partner should smack the child as 'he knows it's wrong – he's been told'. Discussion helped the student begin to understand the scenario from the child's perspective. An ability to understand another's perspective is clearly essential for parenting and indeed for an effective adult life. Many students find this difficult and it is part of cognitive self-change programmes undertaken in many prisons and YOIs (Rose, 2002). This can also be part of a parenting course, when one is considering both the perspectives of one's partner and children. One example was a discussion about how a child might feel when his/her father suddenly came home at the end of a prison sentence. This resulted in plenty of examples of how the young men themselves had felt when they had been released from other YOIs but they had a real problem identifying issues for the child. Discussion with peers and tutors can help develop understanding as can role play. Stories designed to help children deal with different issues can also provide a safe starting point for students to explore feelings; their own and other people's.

The issue of behaviour management is significant for all parents but many fathers in prison will have had poor models of parenting including emotional and physical abuse. A high proportion of young offenders convicted of violent offences have been themselves subjected to violence at home (Neustatter, 2002). For many students, therefore, progress can be identified when they identify alternatives to smacking. At the beginning of the course, the vast majority of students state that you need to smack children in order to have control and that violence is a key way of gaining respect from someone else. A significant number of students come to appreciate, through examples and discussion, that there are alternatives:

> Today I learnt about how to react to a child throwing a tantrum. Even though I'd got my own views which I expressed in class, I still picked up a few tips like positive attention. (Steve, aged 20)

> . . . from what I can see it's the gentle approach, showing patience and love to the child rather than the heavy handed approach and just thinking the child is bad. (Sean, aged 18)

> . . . the course has given me ideas on how to approach bad behaviour. It doesn't always have to be a punishment, sometimes he will just need a hug. (Jason, aged 18)

Clearly there is no evidence as to whether the students will put these ideas into practice when they are with their children but time to explore strategies for managing children's behaviour is essential. The importance of listening to children and of offering choices is stressed throughout the course.

The role of parents, and particularly that of the father, is difficult to explore in a young offender institution. A high proportion of offenders will have spent some

time in care or will have been brought up by a single parent, usually the mother (Prince's Trust, 2001; Neustatter, 2002). Many young men at Aylesbury refuse to blame their parents for their own difficulties and cite the support given by their mothers in particular:

> I liked the way my Mum supported me when I was kicked out of school. (Adam, aged 18)

> My Mum did her best, but I was just a thug really. (Paul, aged 19)

Few students mentioned their fathers, although one spoke warmly of his father who had suffered redundancy but successfully retrained for a new career. He spoke of his father being a role model for him, showing that he could overcome his current difficulties and have a new future. Many students, however, will not have had fathers to provide role models for bringing up their own children. Neustatter (2002) interviewed inmates in a number of YOIs and found that many had no experience of positive fathering. One 19 year old boy she interviewed commented that when his dad was at home he never spent time with him, and was only animated when drunk:

> Sometimes I'd look at the dads in the soaps on TV or in the movies all into their kids and laughing and having fun with them and wonder what that was like. It made me dead sad when I was little but now I don't care. (Neustatter, 2002: 37)

This type of experience makes exploring the role of the father a sensitive, but essential, area. The father's role in supporting their child's development, engaging in positive interactions, modelling appropriate behaviour, and listening and responding to the child are all considered. Clearly all these aspects of the father's role are difficult to undertake in any real sense when they are separated from their children. The aim is to sow the seeds so that positive fathering can be developed after release. Many do express a wish to take their responsibilities seriously:

> My family could be different by fathers playing more of a role in the children's upbringing, that's why I'm going to play more of a role than the men in my family. (Dan, aged 18)

The extent to which this will become a reality will depend on a number of factors that may be beyond his control, including the continuation of the relationship with his partner, the support given to the family after his release and employment opportunities.

Some students will become distressed during the parenting course as they appreciate what they are missing in terms of relationships with their children and may also feel guilty that they are unable to fulfil their parenting role. The perception that young fathers are not interested in their children is confounded by evidence that they often see their role as parents as central to their lives and their children as one of the best things that has happened to them (Prince's Trust, 2001). Certainly many students at Aylesbury think about their children a great deal and can, for example, tell you their ages to the nearest week.

Delivering the course

The course is led by a lecturer employed by the local college that has the contract for delivering educational courses at the institution. She encourages other people to become involved in the delivery of the course so that students have a variety of opinions and perspectives. This is very important in this area where different cultural, class and personal factors are involved. Recently a volunteer with experience of working with young children has been participating in sessions and visiting speakers, such as an officer from the St John's Ambulance Brigade. Additionally the course has links with the local university. Universities often have education departments that deliver undergraduate and postgraduate courses in early years education and care, and undertake research in this field. In the case of the Aylesbury course university staff teach two of the sessions. An issue in course delivery is the model of parenting that is held by the course deliverers and how this relates to the social and cultural experiences of the students. As Burgess (1997) notes, there is no one model of a father and expectations of what it means to be a father will be influenced by culture, ethnicity and class, in addition to individual experiences. Course deliverers try to use a range of visual images and video material to promote discussion of different family types and different roles which fathers may have. Much parenting course material is still often white and middle class, but with the growth of a range of initiatives in working with parents, such as those promoted by Fathers Direct and The Parenting Education and Support Forum, both different materials and improved understanding of a range of approaches to parenting will be developed.

The aim in the delivery of the course is not to be didactic but to be open in sharing experiences and expressing and listening to opinions. This is more likely to bring about changes in practice (Underdown, 1998). Session leaders are prepared to share their own experiences of parenting, including those that have been less successful. It was identified during observations that the students were most engaged, as evidenced by the quality of their listening and subsequent comments, when staff told stories about their own experience of parenting or when they gave examples in 'story' mode. The use of narrative to engage students has been identified in a range of education contexts (McEwan and Egan, 1995). Students were able to make links between these stories and examples of their own experience or stories from the media. They were also able to recall the examples from previous sessions and use them to make generalizations. As Bruner (1990) has argued, we attempt to make sense of a story and in this way form links with other people and begin to understand other perspectives. Staff perceptions about the role of personal stories were that they help students to understand that parenting is an area where mistakes are often made by all of us and that no one is an expert. Additionally, being prepared to share stories helps to form relationships between people.

If students are to move on in their thinking, then it is important to identify their starting points. An atmosphere of trust is developed through mutual respect between staff and students, which is encouraged by the use and development of listening and communication skills within the session. Respect is shown by responding to students' contributions and by valuing their work, which is sometimes displayed on the classroom walls. For some students this is the first time their work will have

been valued in this way and this can support their development of self-esteem, which is notoriously low in young offenders: '. . . most young offenders feel shit about themselves deep down' (Sharmian, aged 20, in Huntercombe YOI, interviewed by Neustatter, 2002, p. 6). Appropriate self-esteem is in an important factor in confident parenting and can be developed through the sensitive delivery of parenting courses that encourage students to reflect on and develop their knowledge and skills. The attitude of the course leaders is particularly important:

> I felt that they actually acknowledged that some of us do care about our kids, that we are not all bastards. (Prisoner on a parenting course, interviewed by Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p. 127)

Parenting courses provide opportunities to talk about a range of emotions that may be difficult to discuss in other contexts. Don, a participant in the parenting programme at Wymott prison, reported that during the sessions men get to build closer relationships: 'We become human' (Evans, 2002, p. 119).

A break for a hot drink part way through the session encourages informality and the sharing of feelings and experiences. It also models identifying and meeting needs. The relationship the students have with the staff in the educational context can help them to become engaged in the learning process. This is sometimes identified by the students:

> One good thing about being in prison is that you have a closer relationship with your teachers. You learn better then. (Jim, aged 18)

Engaging with the students also involves being aware of their interests and using these to encourage learning. Students watch a great deal of television, for example, and often become involved in programmes such as *EastEnders*. They are encouraged to keep a journal and note any examples of parenting in these programmes that can be used as a basis for discussion.

Most of the sessions are delivered by women and it would be advantageous to have more men involved. The students generally see women as naturally expert in relation to bringing up children. This was also the opinion of the young people interviewed for The Prince's Trust Report (2001). Students at Aylesbury assume that as men they would not be expected to know about children and are therefore happy to attend classes on the topic and to be taught by women. One student commented that he presumed that all parenting courses 'on the outside' were for men, as women would not need them. There is no stigma attached to not knowing about children, as there would be in not being capable in other areas of education. Fairly stereotypical views about men and women, and about the upbringing of boys and girls, are issues that are tackled in sessions.

Delivering a parenting course in a prison context is not easy as there are limits to the resources and materials that can be used and, above all, access to children is limited. If a father only sees his child at visiting times then it is difficult for him to tune into his child's needs and to form a relationship. Visiting times can also be stressful, due to the lack of child-friendly facilities, privacy and the emotional energy invested in them by the adults (Boswell and Wedge, 2002). The children are too young to sustain a relationship by telephone or letter and therefore the immediate

effects of a parenting course may be in changing attitudes. This may be helpful to the student's partner and therefore indirectly to the child. Boswell and Wedge (2002) interviewed the partners of some prisoners who had undertaken parenting courses and found them to be positive about their effects. One woman noted:

> He told me all about it and how it helped him to think differently about family problems. He would say: 'They are only doing that [playing up or whatever] because they need attention.' He says there's no point in yelling or smacking; move them out of the situation or occupy them with something else. That's been very helpful to me because he's seeing it from a different angle. (Boswell and Wedge, 2002, p. 130)

Discussion

Participants in this particular course indicate by what they say that the sessions are developing their knowledge and understanding in the area of parenting. Important aspects of the course would seem to be the extent to which the content relates to the needs of the participants, in that information relates to the particular age range of participants' children and to the context of the type of relationship that can be developed with children when the father is in prison. Additionally, opportunities to talk about and develop an understanding of emotional needs and perspectives of others is important. In relation to the teaching of the course, opportunities for discussion, for participants to be respected and for teachers to model, through their mode of delivery, a caring and supportive attitude to students could be seen as significant. The use of personal narratives by those teaching the course appears to increase the engagement of the students and their ability to make links between experiences. Opportunities to undertake practical activities would seem to be an essential part of the learning process. This is the case not only when playing games and practising telling stories but also by using supportive communication with each other, such as making one positive statement about another student's piece of work. In the absence of the children themselves opportunities for undertaking relevant activities need to be provided.

As Dennison and Lyon (2001) point out, a parenting course by itself may only have a limited effect. Opportunities to continue with further learning in this area following course completion would seem to be important as students may complete the parenting course months or years before they are released. Appropriate visit opportunities, including home visits, are important. Other factors, such as support for the family on release, are beyond the control of the institution yet are vital if the work undertaken during the course is to lead to more successful parent–child relationships. As Dennison and Lyon (2001) reported, many of the young men they interviewed six months after their release had good intentions of developing their family life but a number had limited contact with their children or were again in custody. A high level of support for both the young men and their families would seem to be essential. Initiatives such as Sure Start would seem to be well placed to undertake a support role if this were given a high priority.

Becoming a parent changes one's life. For young men in prison it could be an opportunity for breaking a cycle of offending. Sam's son was two months old when he started the parenting course at Aylesbury. During the initial sessions he was visibly distressed at what he was missing of his child's development, but gradually gained in confidence in relation to the role he could play in supporting his partner and, potentially, his son. At the end of the course he wrote:

> I'd like to think that in the years to come I can right my wrongs and learn what I don't know about life with my son. (Sam, aged 19)

Perhaps this could be seen as unduly idealistic but certainly he showed real commitment to changing his life. The catalyst seemed to be the realization, through the birth of his son, that he was now an adult and had responsibilities. He had someone to love and someone who depended on him and would, potentially, love him unconditionally. For many, though not all of the students, their new role as a father seemed to provide a reason for changing their lives. They often had idealized pictures of the future but were nevertheless trying to make plans for their dreams to come true. Youth is a time for ideals and for thinking about the future but many disadvantaged young people are reportedly too depressed to be able to look ahead and to plan optimistically. They see themselves as having no education, no hope of a job and no stake in society. This is particularly the case with offenders who have been seen as too 'depressed and demotivated to think that the future could be any better – so they avoided thinking about it' (Prince's Trust, 2001, p. 88). If rehabilitation is to be successful, being able to think about the future is important and parenting classes can capitalize on the potential for change that exists when an offender has a young child.

Parenting courses may also have other effects not directly related to parenting itself. By building closer relationships between staff and students, these courses may encourage students to enrol for other education classes. An interest in literacy may be stimulated by the desire to read to children. Research in Canada has also suggested that bullying behaviour can be reduced in young people who learn to understand their own and others' emotions through parenting classes (Greenfield, 2002).

It would appear, therefore, that parenting classes can have significant effects on some inmates in young offender institutions and that they need to be preserved and strengthened at a time of enormous pressure on prison education due to increasing populations. In order to be effective the content and delivery of these courses have to be carefully related to the needs of young, imprisoned fathers and, ultimately, community support has to be provided to these fathers and their families on release.

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Useful websites

www.fathersdirect.com
www.parenting-forum.org.uk

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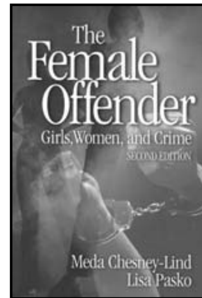

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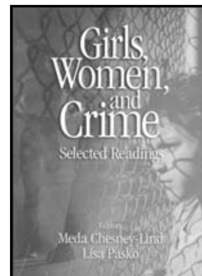
Girls, Women and Crime

Selected Readings

Edited by **Meda Chesney-Lind** and **Lisa J Pasko** *both at University of Hawaii at Manoa*



This book surveys female juvenile delinquency, an important topic often receiving minimal attention in books on women and crime.

Authors of articles represent some of the leading scholars in the field - Claire Renzetti, Frank Cullen, and, of course, Meda Chesney-Lind.

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