

Why Have Visitation Between Incarcerated Parents and their Children?

Estimates indicate that 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent, and the rates are particularly high for children of color and children from economically disadvantaged families (Murphy & Cooper, 2015). Although many incarcerated adults are parents, less than a third of people in state prisons receive a visit from a loved one in a typical month (Prison Policy Initiative [PPI], 2015). There is ample research to support the idea that visitation aids in maintaining family ties and is directly linked to reducing recidivism (Mohr, 2012). In fact, parent-child visits are consistent with one of the central tenets of the Children of Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights, specifically in that children have a right to speak with, see, and touch their parents (San Francisco Children of Incarcerated Parents Partnership, 2003).

The practices involved with in-person visitation vary from facility to facility and range from limiting the frequency of visits, requiring visiting family members to provide social security numbers, banning “excessive emotion” during the visit, and sometimes requiring family members to pay fees for visits. Visitation practices usually involve dress code requirements that can be vague and confusing. In addition, the facilities in which people are incarcerated are likely far from home communities, which makes visiting difficult. There is no research to show that these barriers actually increase security, reduce recidivism, or are related to improved behavior among incarcerated individuals. In addition, these unnecessary barriers actively discourage family members from making the trip (PPI, 2015).

Research on the effectiveness of different types of visits is limited, but many experts believe that contact visits (visits in which children and parents can touch each other) conducted in supportive, safe, and child-friendly environments are likely the best option for families to mitigate the harmful effects of parental incarceration. A growing body of research supports the concept of contact visits (Tasca et al., 2016). Contact visits help:

- Mitigate children’s feelings of abandonment and anxiety (Hairston, 2007)
- Parents and children work on existing relationships, repair bonds, and establish new healthy bonds (Hairston, 2007; Tasca et al., 2016)
- Increase attachment between child and parent and benefit child well-being, emotional adjustment, self-esteem, and school behavior (Arditti, 2008; Fraser, 2011)
- Motivate parents to comply with facility rules, leading to fewer disciplinary reports (Cramer et al., 2017)
- Reduce recidivism (Cramer et al., 2017)

How is Video Visitation Different from In-Person Visitation?

Research supports the idea that contact visits are more effective than video-visitation “when they allow for physical contact, are offered in a child-friendly setting, are part of a family strengthening program, and provide proper emotional preparation and debriefing before and after” (Cramer et al., 2017, p.7).

In-person and video visitation are not equally beneficial; however, more research needs to be done that specifically compares the two. There is a long history of research supporting the idea that visits have been crucial to the rehabilitation process of incarcerated individuals.

- Communication over video increases the formality of the conversation, regardless of the relationship between the two (or more) people (Doherty-Sneddon et al., 1997)
- Establishing trust takes longer over video communication than through face-to-face communication (Gill & Gergle, 2008)
- People express more social distance indicators over video communication than during in-person communication, possibly indicating that it is more difficult to express intimacy and connection over video (Gill & Gergle, 2008)
- There is decreased content and processes coordination in video communication, which leads to shorter/less complex conversations and reduced interaction (Gill & Gergle, 2008)

H.O.P.E. Programming at The Family Tree

The Family Tree has been involved with parenting programming for incarcerated people and their children for over 30 years. Between 2014 and December 2019, over 1,000 parents have participated in parenting programming, which means that around 2,500 have been impacted by the skills their parents have learned while incarcerated. Additionally, nearly 250 children have had the opportunity to join their parent for a contact visit. For additional statistics and outcome measures, please reach out to The Family Tree.

If you are interested in implementing a H.O.P.E. Program, including both parenting classes and the opportunity for parents and children to participate in contact visits, in your facility or the facility in which your loved one is currently incarcerated, please reach out to The Family Tree for more information.

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