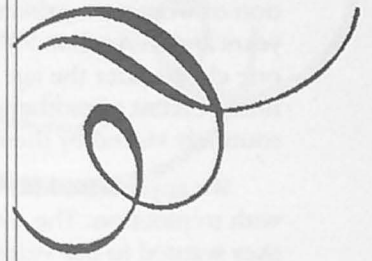


**A SECOND CHANCE FOR A FAMILY'S SURVIVAL:
THE INDIANA STATE LIBRARY'S
READ-TO-ME PROGRAM**

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The Read-To-Me Program is a program that offers an opportunity to offenders in Indiana correctional facilities to share books and the joy of reading with their children. This is a cooperative effort between the Indiana State Library/Library Development Office and the correctional libraries. This program addresses the special needs of incarcerated parents and opens an avenue of communication between parent and child.

The Read-To-Me Program encourages offenders to read to their children in an effort to help keep them in touch with their families. In the process, the offenders discover an important personal value in developing their literacy skills that can connect them to their children. Educated parents, regardless of their situation, become the child's first teacher. What began in the fall of 2000 at one women's correctional facility has expanded to six facilities for both men and women offenders and their children. More than 200 mothers and fathers have participated in the program since its inception.

The facility librarian or a literacy instructor introduces and oversees the program in the facility. The book, *Daddy, Can You Hear Me?*¹ written by Thomas O'Neal Davison, is used to introduce the concept of an incarcerated parent communicating with his child. This book orchestrates alternating feelings and thoughts between child and father. The pictures are large and colorful and the text is minimal.

"Several men asked if they could use the sayings in the book on their tapes."

The Indiana State Library provides the children's books, the cassette tapes (purchased by the Indiana Center for the Book) to record the book, and will loan the facility the use of a cassette recorder to be used for this purpose. When the offender has recorded the book on the cassette, the book and tape is sent to the child, postage paid by the Indiana State Library. The children's ages have ranged from one year to 12 years. A collection of children's books is sent to the facility from the Library Development Office and the incarcerated fathers or

mothers select the book most suitable.

"...is this a good one for a four-year old? An eight-year old?"

The Read-To-Me Program aims to raise consciousness and change behavior in five areas:

1. Breaks the cycle of incarceration and low literacy.
2. Promote conscious positive role modeling as mother/father figures.
3. Educate parents to become their child's first teacher.
4. Empower children with literacy skills and with the self-esteem to advocate for themselves.
5. Instruct parents to use children's books to teach the children in their lives and to make personal connections with them.

Two surveys are included in the program for the purpose of measuring behavior before and after exposure to the Read-To-Me Program. They focus on family literacy habits, both as the mother/father exercise them in relation to the children in their lives and as they experienced them in relation to their own childhoods.

The Follow-Up Survey provides an opportunity for the parents to express what the program meant to them:

"It has helped me get in touch with my children. I never get to see them due to the long distance."

"It has allowed me to be a small part of my children's lives from afar. It has allowed me to send my missing voice to their ears."

"...I never would have thought a prison would do something as cool as this."

"I think this program is an excellent chance for me to at least try to make amends to my children and keep in touch with them in a very up-close and personal way. Thank you for giving me a chance to participate!"

Mothers in prison have become a new phenomenon. Statistics from the US Department of Education noted the critical need for methods to deal with the

mothers' parenting role while incarcerated. A 2001 U. S. Department of Commerce report states, "The population of women in prison has risen 650% in the past 20 years and more than 70% of the women have at least one child under the age of 18. And nationwide, only nine percent of mothers incarcerated in our prisons are routinely visited by their children."²

We approached the first Indiana women's prison with trepidation. The mothers decided beforehand that they wanted to use videocassettes instead of audiocassettes. With cooperation with the facility's librarian and superintendent, we were able to take a video camera into a secure area and tape each mother reading her chosen book. We soon realized that we had nothing to worry about - the nine women had practiced and did a wonderful job of not only reading the books but also conveying their love and concern to their children.

"Well it has helped me to get a closer bond reading to my son on a video tape because now he can see me all the time on video tape reading to him and a start to helping (sic) him learn how to count. Thank you very much for this opportunity to help my son learn things."

"My child watched the video several times over and over. She was rubbing my face on the TV screen and hugged the TV. ...This was a great idea for the children. Thank you very much. It lets us be with our children in a way if and when they miss us a part of us is there with them."

One young mother came to the taping session wearing a three-cornered scarf around her head. A similar scarf was in her lap during her taping. Afterward, she very quietly asked, "Would you put this scarf in my envelope for my little girl?"

When the book and tape is mailed to the child and caregiver, we include a short letter from the Indiana State Library explaining the program and the name of the correctional facility participating. We ask for feedback and this year, a wife and mother wrote on the bottom of one of the letters,

"I think this is an excellent program. The children were very excited to receive books and to hear their Daddy read to them. At 1st (sic) they liked to talk to him. It was cute. But it really brought him home. Now I play the tape for my daughter (who has cried every day since his incarceration) and it has worked in calming her down. Thank you so much for the books. I hope that you continue to extend this to other inmates and their children."

We verbally hear appreciation from the person conducting the program on the inside of the correctional facility. However, one administrator who works with offenders on a daily basis put her thoughts in a

letter and wanted us to know what the program has meant to the men in her facility:

"...Your Read-To-Me Program allowed these men to be a positive influence to their children. It also allowed them to feel like they could be an important part of their child's life - the father they both wanted and needed to be. Your program is one of the few positive things that an incarcerated father can do for his children. It provides a feeling of self-worth to men who are surrounded by metal fences and their own past inadequacies as a father to their children. Your program can be a second chance for a family's survival."

The last sentence is the true meaning of the program and holds the promise of a better future.

NOTES

¹ Thomas O'Neal Davison. *Daddy, Can You Hear Me?* (Roseville, MN: Ultimate Joy Publications, 2000).

² *TOP Update*, 4 (1) (Winter, 2001): 2.

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