In September 2003, the United States Department of Education awarded the Georgia Department of Corrections a grant to evaluate a cognitive-behavioral correctional treatment program called Moral Reconation Therapy (MRT) in six transitional centers (residential work-release programs to foster reintegration after incarceration). Applied Research Services was hired to conduct the project evaluation. The fourth and final year of the evaluation included a life course component in which comprehensive interviews of one hour or more were conducted with random samples of male and female program participants and offenders in the control group who did not receive MRT programming. The purpose of the interviews, which yielded detailed information on childhood and adult events, was to supplement quantitative data to better understand offending behavior. As stated by Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 59), “Life histories can provide the human voices to counterbalance the wide range of statistical data in criminology and the social sciences at large.”

Our study sample was comprised of Georgia offenders who served at least a portion of their prison sentence at a transitional center between March 2004 and June 2006. During the summer of 2007, interviews were completed with 121 participants, most of whom were either re-incarcerated or under post-release supervision. In the final interview sample, 51 men, with 130 children among them, identified themselves as both a substance abuser and a father. This article describes the life experiences shared by these 51 men and offers insights into the impact of life events on both their perceptions of fatherhood and their ability to be effective parents.

Early Family Life

Most of the substance-abusing fathers in our study lived in an array of dysfunctional family situations. One in ten never lived with a parent but usually resided with a grandparent or other relative throughout childhood. Many lived with single mothers who were incapable of being fully effective parents. Ten percent of mothers were reported to have problems with drug use, and almost one-third of mothers were reported to have alcohol problems. Additionally, 20% of mothers were arrested during the offenders’ childhoods.

Fathers were not an integral part of the lives of these men. Over one-third had no relationship with their father; some did not even know the identity of their father. Another third reported having a relationship with their father that they characterized as poor, usually due to paternal substance abuse, criminality, or violent behavior. The remaining one-third said they had a good relationship with their father, although contact between them was usually limited. Most did not reside in the same home with their father. Nor did their fathers serve a primary parental role in their lives. Substance abuse was common among fathers of offenders, with 22% reporting that their father had a drug problem and nearly half reporting alcohol abuse. Criminality was also common, with 61% of fathers having been arrested and over one-third having served time behind bars, some for very long periods of time.
Respondents reported experiencing other family dysfunction during childhood. One in four was the victim of physical abuse (defined as being punished in a way that caused bruises, burns, cuts, or broken bones). Over half (56%) said that they had seen or heard family violence in their home while growing up. Half described their families as either poor or very poor.

Despite their desire to be good fathers (and for some, grandfathers), most lacked the knowledge, ability, and skills for the job.

Adult Experiences

The fathers in this study provided a somewhat bleak picture of their own adult lives and of their ability to be financial providers and positive role models for their children. Two-thirds said they had spent half or more of their life unemployed (not including time in prison). The men told stories of their struggles to find employment, usually blaming their convicted felon status. Anecdotally, most attributed the majority of their unemployment to substance abuse, which interfered with their interest in attaining gainful employment or their ability to maintain it.

All of the fathers defined themselves as addicts and told many stories concerning the impact of substance use on both themselves and their families. Men with primary custody of their children (18%) expressed much guilt over the fact that they chose drugs or alcohol over the well-being of their children. However, they seemed unable to fully comprehend the impact that their substance abuse and incarceration(s) may have had on their offspring. They reflected more on their own sorrow for years lost with their children than on the actual trauma inflicted on them.

The men without primary custody of their children (82%) were frequently nonchalant about the impact of their substance use on their children. Many stressed that it was best that the children did not reside with them because they were uninterested in parenting or unfit for the job. These men tended to focus more on the negative impact of their substance use on their own parents (their mothers in particular) than on their current spouses or children.

As fathers, 38% said that they were uninvolved in the lives of their children. Some had no contact at all with their children; others had not spoken to them in many months or years. Just under half (46%) said they had limited contact with their children, and 16% said they were actively a part of their children’s lives. It was evident that a large proportion of these men had inflated views of their actual participation as fathers. For example, several men who characterized themselves as actively involved in all aspects of their children’s lives were incarcerated when interviewed. Some who cited having limited contact with their children believed that they were integrally involved in parenting. Making a phone call encouraging a child to do well in school or sending a birthday card were offered as examples of important fatherly contributions and proof of their active parental participation.

An important observation was the contrast between the men’s perception of the impact of poor fathering on them and their perception of the impact of their own poor fathering on their children. When the majority of offenders talked about their own fathers, they expressed much anger and sadness at their father’s lack of involvement in their life. They mentioned longing for their father’s love, a lifetime of pain over their father’s rejection, turning to early substance use to hide their pain and fury, as well as lashing out and getting into trouble in childhood. One in three
cited not having a father figure as one of the primary reasons for his youthful criminality. However, offenders did not make connections between these past wounds and their lack of involvement with and resulting pain for their own children. When interviewers probed further, most offenders dismissed the idea, asserting that their children were stronger than they had been or were better off without their negative influence. Or they just flatly dismissed the possibility of a repeated pattern.

Despite these offenders’ lack of participation in hands-on fathering, interviewers repeatedly heard them cite children as one of their biggest motivators for success upon release. The majority desperately wanted to reconnect with their children and to become both a good role model and a meaningful part of their children’s lives. The idea of being a “role model” was pervasive in this group, perhaps because so many reported missing a strong male role model growing up. Many equated being a role model for their children as the ultimate sign of success on the outside. What was clear throughout these conversations, though, was that despite their desire to be good fathers (and for some, grandfathers), most lacked the knowledge, ability, and skills for the job. The majority were forthright about this lack of knowledge, while others clung to the belief that they knew all that was needed.

When we look at the lives of these men, it is not difficult to understand why they need parenting skills. Most lacked a strong paternal role model, and some also missed a strong maternal role model. Even with some parenting knowledge, the better part of their adult lives had usually been spent under the influence of drugs and alcohol, which greatly impaired their ability to care for their children and in many cases obliterated their interest in parenting altogether.

As these men served their time in prison, regained sobriety and cognitive functioning, and had time to reflect on their lives, they were able to focus on the future they wanted to create. For most, a strong desire to be a good father emerged. However, the sordid childhoods and adult lives of these men greatly impede their ability to parent, making the need for correctional parenting programs evident.

In addition, we believe that motivational interviewing (MI) techniques could be used to address offender attitudes towards parenting interventions. Nearly all of the addicts interviewed while incarcerated shared a euphoric view of their future outside of prison. Despite personal experiences attesting to the difficulty in maintaining sobriety, obtaining employment, and re-establishing family relationships, the men maintained that “this time” it would be different. While their optimism is admirable, it fails to acknowledge the true challenges faced upon release. Offenders readily acknowledged that they lacked the skills to be effective fathers, but most believed that as they interacted with their children, fathering would come naturally. Using properly applied evidence-based MI techniques, correctional counselors can hone in on the individual motivations of offenders and then present parenting classes as a way to help them achieve their personal goals. Shown to resolve ambivalence and reduce resistance to interventions (Walters, Clark, Gingerich, & Metz, 2007), motivational interviewing can be a valuable complement to parenting programs for offenders.

Research shows that developing supportive parent-child relationships and proper parenting strategies can reduce recidivism among youthful and adult offenders (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser, Erickson, & Metz, 2008; RKC Group & Przybylski, 2008). Many offenders see their children as motivators for success. Helping these men develop needed parenting skills is a critical step in their ability to rebuild family ties and get their lives together. Correctional agencies cannot change the dysfunctional past of these offenders, but parenting classes offer a glimmer of hope that there can be a brighter future for paternal offenders and their children.

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REFERENCES


