

LIFE SKILLS IN CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED FATHERS

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I. THE LIVING INTERACTIVE FAMILY EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) Program was established in 1999 at the Potosi Correctional Center, a maximum security prison in Missouri. The LIFE Program is designed to help children and youth whose fathers, or other significant male role models, are incarcerated. It was started by University of Missouri Outreach and Extension, in conjunction with the Missouri Department of Corrections and a number of incarcerated fathers at Potosi Correctional Center (PCC). The program is supported by a grant from the USDA's Children, Youth and Families At Risk (CYFAR) Program.

An At-Risk Population

At mid-year 2002, the incarcerated population in the United States exceeded two million people for the first time (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2003). Many of these incarcerated people are also parents. Their children face several unique challenges related to long-term separation from the incarcerated parent, family disruption, anxiety about the parent's welfare, and the social stigma associated with incarceration.

Because of these challenges, the children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk for a number of social, behavioral, and academic problems. Feelings of abandonment, sadness, anxiety, and anger can lead to poor academic performance and antisocial behavior (Johnston 1995, Block and Potthast 2001). A review of empirical studies indicates that the children of incarcerated parents are at increased risk for developing a variety of behavioral disorders (Gabel 1992).

Impacts of the LIFE Program

The purpose of the LIFE Program is to help children and youth successfully overcome some of the challenges of parental incarceration. The anticipated long-term impacts of the program are indicated in the program logic model (appendix 2) and include the following:

- improving children's self esteem and social skills,
- reducing their sense of isolation,
- helping them stay in school longer,
- helping them maintain long-term relationships with their fathers,
- helping them become better leaders and citizens, and
- reducing their risk of incarceration.

The LIFE Program works to achieve these long-term impacts in two ways. First, it provides an enhanced visitation environment for children and their incarcerated fathers. In contrast to the traditional prison visit setting, the enhanced visitation environment helps children and their fathers develop stronger and healthier relationships. Detailed information, photos, and video clips describing the LIFE Program's enhanced visitation environment, along with the results of a qualitative evaluation of its impacts on the parent-child relationship, can be found in Dunn and Arbuckle (2002).

The second way that the LIFE Program helps these children is by involving them in 4-H programming. Four-H programming is designed to promote positive youth development by helping children and youth develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will allow them to become productive and contributing members of society. At the 4-H meetings of the LIFE Program, children and their fathers work together on traditional 4-H club activities. These include curricula-based activities focused on the development of life skills, such as conflict resolution, substance abuse resistance, teamwork, and character development.

As reflected in the program logic model, one of the anticipated intermediate impacts of the LIFE Program is that children will build character and life skills through participation in 4-H programs. This document reports on an evaluation of participants' life skills. Section II describes the methods used in the evaluation, while section III presents the results of the evaluation. The closing section summarizes the main points and suggests how the information can be used to improve the effectiveness of the program.

II. MEASURING AND ANALYZING LIFE SKILLS

In order to monitor changes in the life skills of the children and youth participating in the LIFE Program, a questionnaire was used to assess participants' life skills in seven categories. This questionnaire was adapted from several existing questionnaires. It was administered in July 2002 and again in January 2003. This section describes the development and implementation of the life skills questionnaire.

Background Research

The instrument (questionnaire) used to assess life skills in this study was adapted from three different instruments. Specifically, the instrument for this study draws from the following evaluation approaches: 1) the Rosenberg Self esteem Scale; 2) the 4-H Four-Fold Youth Development Model; and 3) an impact evaluation instrument for Utah's Youth and Families with Promise Program.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. The Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (SES) is one of the most widely used approaches for measuring self esteem in the social sciences. The SES was originally developed in the 1960s as part of a large-scale study of adolescent self esteem (Rosenberg 1965). It is based on the premise that self-concept is shaped by social structural positions, such as racial/ethnic status, and institutional contexts, such as schools and families (Rosenberg 1986). The instrument for this study uses several questions from the SES to evaluate self esteem.

Four-Fold Youth Development Model. The Four-Fold Youth Development Model was developed as a joint project between the Ohio State University and Purdue University (Barkman et al. 1999). The Four-Fold Model provides a set of guidelines and tools for evaluating the impacts of youth development programming, particularly 4-H programs.

The instrument used in this study adapted questions from three of the subscales in the Four-Fold Model: communication, problem solving, and goal achievement.

Youth and Families with Promise Program. Utah State University Extension's Youth and Families with Promise Program (YFP) is a mentoring program that works with at-risk youth, ages 10 to 14, and their families. The YFP Program is designed to reduce delinquent behavior while helping youth improve their academic performance, increase their interpersonal competence, and strengthen their family bonds. Changes in these types of life skills and social competencies are evaluated using a survey approach.¹ Several questions from the YFP instrument, especially those related to academics and learning, goal setting and achievement, and decision making were included in the instrument for this study.

Life Skills Instrument

The life skills instrument consists of 36 questions, divided into two parts. The first part contains six questions related to demographics (age, gender, race, grade) and frequency of program participation. The second part contains 28 questions related to life skills and two questions that ask participants to directly rate the impacts of the program.

The life skills questions fall into seven categories:

- academics and learning,
- communication,
- decision making,
- goal setting and goal achievement,
- problem solving,
- self esteem, and
- social competencies.

There are four questions in each of these categories, which are presented in mixed order on the instrument. The questions included in each category are listed in appendix 2. Responses are recorded on a five-point Likert scale. Depending on the wording of the question, the responses may range from “never” to “always” or from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
never	not often	sometimes	usually	always
strongly disagree	disagree	not sure	agree	strongly agree

The instrument includes both original questions and questions that were adapted from the evaluation approaches discussed above. The instrument was pilot tested with several

¹ In 2001, CYFAR highlighted the YFP impact evaluation as an *exemplary program evaluation*.

children and youth before being finalized. Based on the results from the pilot tests, the language used in the questions was clarified and simplified. The current instrument is written at a fourth grade reading level, as measured by the Flesch-Kincaid scale.

Assessment Procedure

The assessment procedure is designed to protect the anonymity of the respondents. Respondents do not write their names on the questionnaire, and they are provided with identical blank envelopes. After answering the questions, respondents place the questionnaire inside the envelope, and place the sealed envelope into a “ballot box.” The length of time needed to complete the questionnaire ranges from five to 15 minutes.

About half of the children and youth who participate in the LIFE program were assessed in each round. For both of these assessments, all children and youth attending the LIFE 4-H club meeting on that day were assessed. However, because the PCC is located in a relatively remote rural area, it is difficult for many of the participants and their caregivers to travel to Potosi every month. In addition, the incarcerated fathers are sometimes prevented from participating in meetings due to violations of prison regulations. Therefore, it is rare for all participants to be present at a given meeting.

III. ASSESSMENT RESULTS

This section reports on the results of two assessment rounds (July 2002 and January 2003). Most of the respondents are males between the ages of 11 and 14. The results indicate that their scores increased by about 12 percent between the first two rounds. The results also indicate that several of the life skills categories are correlated.

Respondent Characteristics and Program Participation Rates

The first assessment occurred in July 2002. Of the seven program participants who were assessed in the first round, six were male and one was female (table 1). Almost all of the participants were between the ages of 11 and 14 and had been in the program for at least three months. The only exception was a six-year-old child who had only recently begun to participate in the program.

Table 1. July 2002 Participant Characteristics and Attendance Data

	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Grade	Time in Program	Frequency of Participation
1	14	Male	White	9	3+ Months	Less than half of meetings
2	13	Male	Mixed race	7	3+ Months	All of meetings
3	13	Male	White	na	3+ Months	Half of meetings
4	12	Female	White	5	3+ Months	Less than half of meetings
5	11	Male	White	5	3+ Months	Most of meetings
6	12	Male	Mixed race	5	3+ Months	All of meetings
7	6	Male	White	K	1 Month	Less than half of meetings

The second assessment, which took place in January 2003, included nine program participants (table 2). The respondents in the second assessment share several characteristics with those in the first assessment:

- 1) all but one of the respondents are male;
- 2) most respondents are white;
- 3) most respondents have participated in the program three or more months; and
- 4) most respondents are between 12 and 14 years old, with respondents' average age being 12 years old in both rounds.

While the responses are anonymous, it appears from the demographic and participation information that at least four of the seven respondents in the first round were probably re-tested in the second round.

Table 2. January 2003 Participant Characteristics and Attendance Data

	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Grade	Time in Program	Frequency of Participation
1	17	Male	Black	11	3+ Months	Half of meetings
2	14	Male	White	8	3+ Months	Most of meetings
3	14	Male	White	8	3+ Months	Half of meetings
4	13	Male	White	7	3+ Months	Most of meetings
5	12	Male	Mixed Race	6	3+ Months	All of meetings
6	7	Male	White	1	3+ Months	All of meetings
7	13	Male	White	7	1-3 Months	All of meetings
8	5	Female	White	K	1-3 Months	All of meetings
9	13	Male	Black	7	1 Month	Most of meetings

Total Scores and Scores by Category

The maximum possible score for the life skills assessment is 140 points, since each of the 28 questions can receive between one and five points. The scores in the first round of the assessment provide a baseline picture of how the participants rate themselves in key life skills areas. The results are telling: the average total score for the sample was only 67 percent (94 out of a possible 140 points). This indicates that, on average, respondents did not rate themselves highly in a number of skills areas (table 3).

The average score in January 2003 increased to 75 percent (105 out of a possible 140 points). As shown in table 3, the average score for this second round was 12 percent higher than it was for the first round. This indicates that there have been some improvements in life skills among the children and youth participating in the LIFE Program. While there were improvements in every category, the greatest improvements came in social competencies (up 23 percent), communication (up 18 percent), and decision making (up 12 percent).²

² The percentage change in scores is calculated as follows: (new score – old score)/old score. For example, in the case of the average total score, the calculation is $(75 - 67)/67 = 12$ percent.

Table 3. Average Scores by Category, July 2002 and January 2003 (percent)

Life Skills Category	Round 1: July 2002 (n=7)	Round 2: January 2003 (n=9)	Percent change in average scores
Academics/learning	70	74	+6
Goal setting/achievement	62	67	+8
Decision making	69	77	+12
Problem solving	70	76	+9
Communication	60	71	+18
Social competencies	66	81	+23
Self esteem	75	80	+7
Total Score	67	75	+12

The scores in each category provide some information about how respondents rate themselves in specific skills areas. Scores in the self-esteem category were relatively high in both rounds. This is encouraging, since it indicates that the participants have a generally good self-concept. Higher self esteem may translate into a greater capacity for improvement in other skills areas over time. On the other hand, scores for goal setting and for communication were relatively low in both rounds.

Correlations Between Skills Areas

Table 4. Correlation Between Life Skills Categories (July 2002)

	Academics	Goal setting	Decision making	Problem solving	Communication	Social comp.	Self esteem
Academics	1 .	-.234 (.613)	.455 (.304)	.441 (.321)	-.245 (.596)	.309 (.500)	.925 (.003)
Goal setting		1 .	.548 (.203)	.108 (.818)	.497 (.256)	.466 (.292)	-.148 (.752)
Decision making			1 .	.715 (.071)	.281 (.542)	.882 (.009)	.473 (.284)
Problem solving				1 .	.481 (.275)	.875 (.010)	.274 (.552)
Communication					1 .	.599 (.156)	-.232 (.616)
Social comp.						1 .	.299 (.514)
Self esteem							1 .

Note: Numbers in table are Pearson correlation coefficients with two-tailed significance levels in parentheses. The shaded entries represent statistically significant correlations.

An analysis of the correlations between scores in the different life skills categories (table 4) reveals some statistically significant relationships:

- There is a very strong relationship between having good self esteem and having positive attitudes about academics and learning.
- The participants with higher scores in the social competencies category also have higher scores in the decision-making and problem-solving categories.

The correlation results do not necessarily indicate about the direction of cause-and-effect relationships. For example, it is not clear whether high self esteem leads to positive attitudes about academics or vice versa. Similarly, participants with high scores in the social competency category, which measures how well participants relate to other people, appear to be better able to think through problems and consider the consequences of their actions before making decisions. It may be that improvements in one of these skills leads to improvements in the others, or it may be that they are mutually reinforcing.

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While the children of incarcerated parents face a number of challenges, the assessment results indicate that the LIFE Program helps children and youth improve the life skills they need to more successfully meet these challenges. More specifically, the findings indicate that the LIFE Program has helped children and youth to improve their social competencies, communications skills, and decision-making skills. These results are significant both for program managers and for the parents and caregivers of the children.

Implications for Parents and Caregivers

- Parents and caregivers should encourage and facilitate children's participation in the LIFE Program, since it is effective in helping children improve their life skills.
- The children's greatest strengths relate to self esteem and social competencies.
- The children's greatest weaknesses relate to goal setting and communication.
- Because of the strong link between academics and self esteem, parents and caregivers should place extra emphasis on helping children succeed in school.

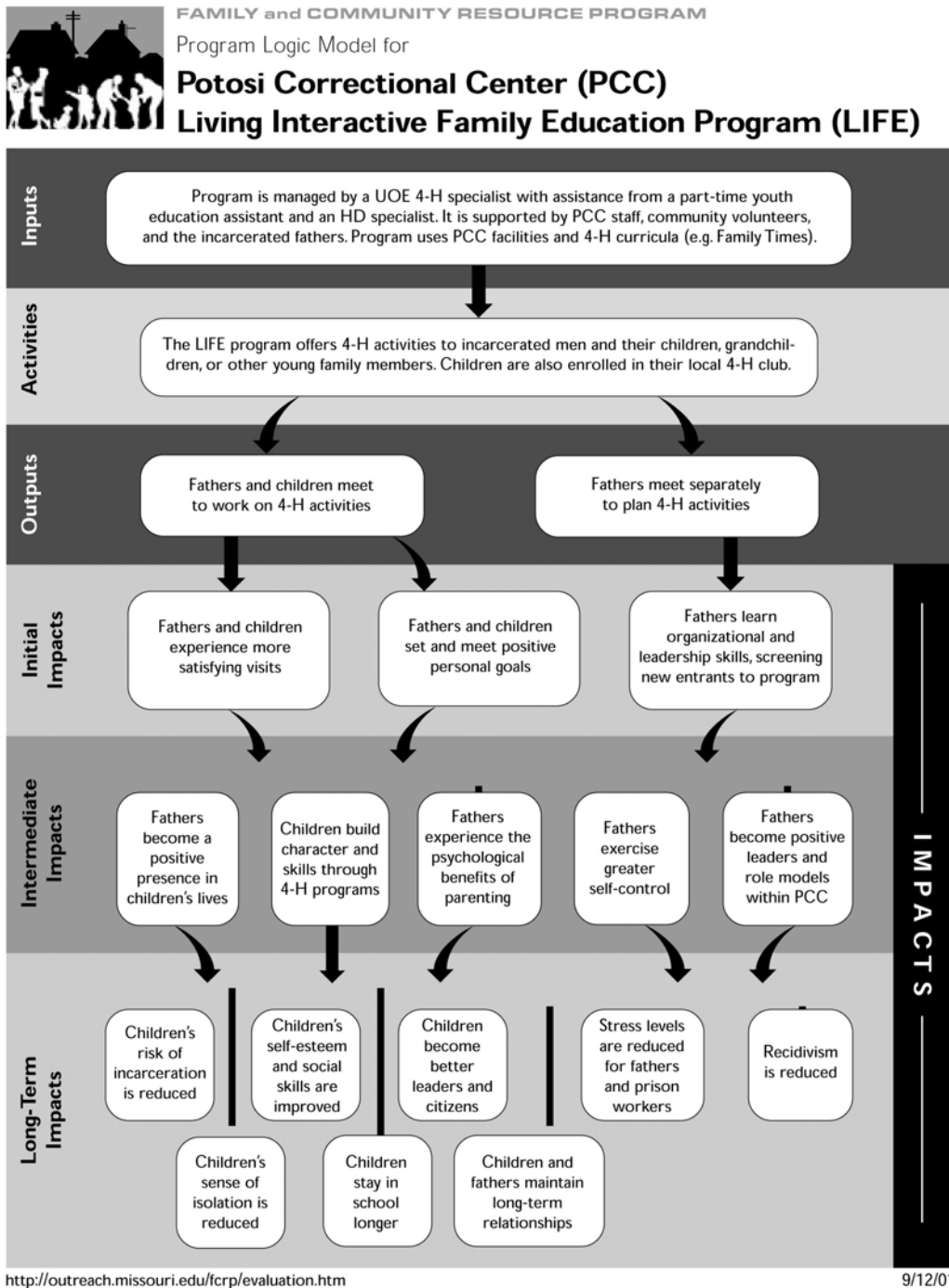
Implications for Program Managers

- The LIFE Program is meeting its objective of helping children and youth strengthen their life skills.
- The programming has been most effective in increasing children's social competencies, communication skills, and decision-making skills.
- The LIFE program should continue to target communication skills, both because past programming has been effective and because scores are still low in this area.
- Additional programming is needed to improve goal setting and goal achievement.
- The program should provide parents and caregivers with effective tools and strategies for helping their children succeed in school.

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APPENDIX 1: PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL FOR LIFE PROGRAM



APPENDIX 2: LIFE SKILLS CATEGORIES AND QUESTIONS

Academics and learning

I read when I have free time.
I finish my school homework on time.
I like to learn new things at school.
I think that doing well in school is important.

Goal setting and goal achievement

I reach goals I have set for myself.
I plan ahead for things that need to be done.
I keep trying when things become difficult.
I set challenging goals for myself.

Decision making

Before I make a decision, I think about how it will affect me.
I say “no” to my friends if they want me to do something that is wrong.
Before I make a decision, I think about how it will affect other people.
I do things that are considered safe.

Problem solving

I think about different ways I can solve a problem before I decide.
I try to get the facts before I solve a problem.
When I have a problem, I try to figure out just what the problem is.
I try to think about what will happen if I solve a problem in different ways.

Communication

I look people in the eye when I talk with them.
I find it easy to get my point across.
I think about what I’m going to say before I speak.
I try to understand what the other person is saying before I answer them.

Social competencies

I can talk to my friends about personal things.
I try to solve problems without fighting.
I am good at cooperating with a team.
I think I am good at making and keeping friends.

Self esteem

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
I feel that I am at least as good as most other people my age.
I have a good attitude about myself.
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.