

**CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS AND
ENHANCED VISITATION PROGRAMS:
IMPACTS OF THE
LIVING INTERACTIVE FAMILY EDUCATION
(LIFE) PROGRAM**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The estimated 1.5 million children of incarcerated parents are often overlooked in policy debates related to the correctional system. Yet, children who are separated from parents by prison can experience feelings of abandonment, sadness, and anger, which may lead to eating and sleeping disorders, lower academic performance, and disruptive behavior. There is also the potential for negative long-term impacts, such as an increased lifetime risk of incarceration. The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program is designed to alleviate some of these negative impacts by providing incarcerated parents and their children with an enhanced visit setting organized around 4-H activities. The purpose of this paper is to report on the impacts of the LIFE program on the children who participate.

Prison Visitation

Studies show that frequent, regular visitation is beneficial to children of incarcerated parents. Children who visit their incarcerated parents score higher on measures of well-being, intelligence, and emotional and behavioral measures. However, traditional visit settings can be hard on children and incarcerated parents. Visitors experience long waits, crowded facilities, and behavioral restrictions. Conditions in the standard visit setting are generally inappropriate for children and are not conducive to meaningful parent-child interaction. Enhanced visitation programs can reduce the negative impacts of parental incarceration by allowing children and their parents to interact more closely in child-oriented environments.

The Living Interactive Family Education Program

The LIFE program is an enhanced visitation program operating at the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC), a maximum-security prison in Missouri. Incarcerated fathers and state 4-H staff developed the LIFE program. As a partnership between University Outreach and Extension and the Missouri Department of Corrections, the program is funded by a grant from the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative of the CSREES-USDA.

The overall objective of the LIFE program is to promote a strong, healthy, and nurturing family environment for children of incarcerated fathers, while helping those fathers become positive role models and mentors. The LIFE program provides children and their fathers with a low-stress, child-friendly environment in which they work together on 4-H activities based on youth and family development curricula. All LIFE fathers also attend monthly parenting skills classes.

Research Approach

The primary objective of this study was to determine the impacts of the LIFE program on the children who participate. A program logic model provided the research framework by indicating how the inputs, activities, and outputs of the LIFE program lead to positive impacts. The research approach included a review of literature, preliminary interviews with fathers, and a formal focus group interview. In these interviews, fathers discussed program-related changes in their relationships with their children and changes that they have observed in their children as a result of the program. This report is based on what fathers had to say about these changes.

Characteristics of the LIFE Program

Fathers identified several program characteristics that lead to positive impacts on children. The less restrictive visit setting allows everyone to move more freely, express themselves physically, and interact spontaneously. The curricula-based projects and activities provide the opportunity for fathers and children to work as teams in order to achieve constructive goals. Outside the 4-H meetings, fathers attend classes to improve their parenting skills. These characteristics can be viewed as program inputs: they are the elements of the LIFE program that contribute to the program's effectiveness in having positive impacts on the children and youth who participate.

The LIFE Program's Impacts on Children

The positive impacts that fathers attribute to the program can be grouped into five categories:

1. Stronger relationships The development of stronger parent-child relationships through discovery, the development of mutual respect, and program activities that promote bonding.
2. Improved communication Improvements in the lines of communication between parent and child.
3. Family unity The creation and reinforcement of a sense of family unity between fathers, children, and caregivers.
4. Life skills The development of important life skills in the children, such as leadership, empathy, and self-control.
5. Improved behavior Improved behavior and academic performance by the children.

According to the fathers, the enhanced interaction in LIFE 4-H meetings leads to a process of learning and discovery and fosters the development of deeper bonds between parents and children. The curricula-based projects and activities help parents and children develop mutual respect as they develop life skills. The parenting meetings give fathers new parenting skills and tools, and a greater understanding of what it means to be a father. These changes lead to better communication and overall improvements in parent-child relationships. The deeper bonds, mutual respect, and improved lines of communication have allowed fathers to become positive influences in their children's lives. Taken together, these positive impacts lead to improvements in the children's social and academic adjustment and overall well-being.

There are a number of studies to indicate that the children of incarcerated parents experience negative impacts, and there are a few studies to indicate that enhanced visitation programs can have beneficial effects. The results of this evaluation of the LIFE program indicate that it has led to substantial positive impacts on the children who participate. If enhanced visitation programs can significantly help the children of incarcerated parents, then the LIFE program provides a model for improving the lives of some of the large number of children affected throughout Missouri and the rest of the country.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The children of incarcerated parents are often overlooked in debates about criminal justice and the correctional system. Yet, these children can be negatively affected, both immediately and in the long run, by their parents' incarceration. The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program at Missouri's Potosi Correctional Center is designed to reduce some of these negative impacts by bringing children together with their parents in an enhanced visit setting organized around 4-H activities. The LIFE program, funded by the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative of the CSREES-USDA, is an innovative approach for reaching children and youth with incarcerated parents.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the impacts of the LIFE program on the children of incarcerated fathers. This first section briefly discusses, in general terms, the problems faced by the children of incarcerated parents and provides additional information on the LIFE program. Section two describes the qualitative research methods used in this evaluation, which consisted of in-depth and focus group interviews with incarcerated fathers. The results in sections three and four are based on information provided by the incarcerated fathers participating in the LIFE program. Section three describes specific features of the LIFE program that distinguish it from traditional visitation and lead to positive impacts on the children who participate. Section four details the types of positive impacts that the LIFE program has on children and youth, including improvements in parent-child bonds, communication, family unity, life skills, behavior, and academic performance.

A. Children of Incarcerated Parents and Visitation

It is estimated that there are some 1.5 million children of incarcerated parents in the United States (Mumola 2000, p. 1). Children can be negatively affected by the incarceration of their parents, sometimes resulting in long-term problems. Separation from parents by prison can result in feelings of abandonment, sadness, and anger, and can lead to eating and sleeping disorders, lower academic performance, and disruptive behavior (Johnston 1995a; Block and Potthast 2001).

Studies show that frequent, regular visitation is beneficial to children of incarcerated parents: children who visit their incarcerated parents score higher on measures of well-being, intelligence, emotional adjustment, and behavior. In a review of child welfare literature, Johnston (1995b, p. 138) concludes that visitation produces beneficial effects for several reasons:

- Visits allow children to express their emotional reactions to the separation. The more disturbed children are by the separation, the more important it is that visits occur.
- Visits help parents to deal with separation and loss issues, increasing their ability to help their children deal with the same issues.
- Children who are separated from their parents can have irrational feelings and fears about their parents. Visits allow children to deal with those feelings and fears, and help them to form a more realistic understanding of their parents' circumstances.
- Visits allow parents to model appropriate interactions for children who react negatively to the separation.

- Visits allow parents and children to maintain their existing relationship, which leads to more successful reunification after incarceration.

Despite evidence that regular visits can have beneficial impacts on children, child protective services workers, caregivers, and incarcerated parents often do not support visitation because they perceive that visitation in the prison setting could have negative effects on children. In addition, prisons are often far away, making it difficult for caregivers to transport children for visits. When visits do occur, traditional visit settings can be inappropriate for children, providing little opportunity for meaningful parent-child interaction (Block and Potthast 2001).

B. Traditional Visitation and Communication

Visitation between incarcerated fathers and their children in the traditional visit setting can be difficult for fathers, children, and caregivers alike. Hairston (2001, p. 157-158) explains some of the problems associated with traditional visits in prisons around the country:

Prison visiting is both psychologically and physically demanding for children and adults, as the visiting environment in most prisons is poor. . . . Standing in line for hours to be cleared for a visit that lasts less than half the time spent waiting, being subjected to pat and frisk searches and rude treatment, and visiting in crowded, noisy, dirty, overheated facilities, or with parents and children separated by a glass barrier, are hardly conducive to promoting family bonds.

Aside from the uncomfortable environment, regulations also affect the quality of visits. Rules governing the timing, conditions, and duration of visits restrict social interaction between parents and children pose obstacles to parent-child attachments (Hairston 2001).

Telephone and mail communication can be problematic as well. In some prisons, policies about collect calls can result in high telephone bills for children's households. Hairston (2001, p. 158) found that collect calls from prisoners cost five to ten times more than they would if they were placed from a private phone line. Prisoners and their families may have no other options than to pay the maximum allowable rates. For families with limited resources, calls can generate resentment and otherwise cause friction, especially when fathers no longer have strong relationships with their children's caregivers. Communication by mail may have a high social cost, since correspondence from some prisons is stamped with a visible warning that it is from a correctional institution. Caregivers may discourage fathers from communicating by mail to avoid the stigmatizing public warning label (Hairston 2001).

It is important to note that these are general observations that do not necessarily reflect the actual practices and procedures at Potosi Correctional Center (PCC). The telephone and mail privileges at PCC are not as restrictive as described above. And, while the atmosphere in the traditional visiting room is governed by strict rules, these rules are clearly posted and professionally enforced. For example, fathers are required to limit physical contact with their children and remain seated with their hands visible on the tabletop. Because PCC is a maximum-security institution, the rules are necessary to ensure the safety of visitors, staff, and offenders.

C. Enhanced Visitation Programs

Although there are not many studies on the impacts of enhanced visitation programs, the ones that exist indicate that these programs can reduce the negative impacts of parental incarceration on children. Frequent visitation in a non-threatening environment can lead to improvements in parent-child relationships, which can, in turn, lead to reductions in anti-social behavior and increases in self-esteem among the children of incarcerated parents (Johnston 1995b).

Enhanced visitation programs address the need for extended physical contact between children and their parents. In contrast to restrictive traditional visit settings that allow only a minimal amount of physical contact, enhanced visitation programs allow children and their parents to interact more closely in child-oriented environments, which reduces the amount of stress experienced by parents and children during visits (Johnston 1995c).

In essence, enhanced visitation programs seek to normalize interaction between incarcerated parents and their children. They often provide more flexible visiting schedules, play areas with toys and activities, and longer, more meaningful contact times (Block and Potthast 2001). Such programs view visitation as a beneficial, low-cost intervention that can ameliorate the negative impacts of separation, play a key role in children's future development, and help reduce future anti-social behavior on the part of the children (Johnston 1995b).

One of the few enhanced visitation programs that has been evaluated is the Girl Scouts Beyond Bars (GSBB) program. In GSBB, incarcerated mothers and their daughters meet twice monthly for structured troop activities and one-on-one private conversation. An impact assessment of the program found that, compared to a control group, GSBB mothers averaged more visits from their daughters per year (11.6 vs. 6.1) (Block and Potthast 2001, p. 104). In interviews, caregivers indicated that they had observed substantial positive impacts among the children in their care since the girls began participating in GSBB. These improvements consisted of better communication and understanding between incarcerated mothers and their daughters, a reduction in anti-social behavior at home and at school, and higher self-esteem. The study concludes that child welfare professionals should consider enhanced visitation programs as a means to support parent-child relationships and reduce some of the problems caused by parental incarceration.

D. The Living Interactive Family Education Program

1. The Program

The Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program is an enhanced visitation program at the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC), a maximum-security prison in Mineral Point, Missouri. The LIFE program was developed jointly between the incarcerated fathers and state 4-H staff to address the needs of the children. It is a partnership between University Outreach and Extension and the Missouri Department of Corrections. The program is supported by a New Communities Project grant from the CSREES-USDA Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative. The planning for the LIFE program began in late 1999, and the first meetings were held in March 2000.

There are two main components to the LIFE program: 4-H activities and parenting training. The 4-H activities are held monthly at the correctional facility. These meetings provide children and their incarcerated fathers with a comfortable visitation atmosphere that is conducive to positive physical and verbal interaction. At the monthly meetings, children and their fathers work together on traditional 4-H club activities such as arts and crafts projects and curricula-based activities that focus on subjects such as conflict resolution, substance abuse resistance, teamwork, and character development.

All fathers who participate in the LIFE program also attend monthly classes in parenting skills. The parenting training component seeks to help fathers learn to be a positive influence in their children's lives. Classes focus on areas such as communication, anger management, teamwork, and positive discipline. The overall objective of the LIFE program is to promote a strong, healthy, and nurturing family environment for the children of incarcerated parents, while helping incarcerated parents become positive role models and mentors to their children.

2. Program Participants

Membership in the LIFE program was originally open only to fathers, grandfathers, and stepfathers who were incarcerated at the Potosi Correctional Center, their children and grandchildren, and the legal guardians of the children and grandchildren. Eligibility criteria were subsequently modified to "include incarcerated men who have a significant role model relationship with nieces, nephews, and other close relatives between the ages of four and 19" (LIFE Program Constitution and By-Laws, p. 2).¹

The members of the LIFE program play an active role in managing the program. They developed the formal program bylaws, which set strict rules for membership. Current members screen potential LIFE participants to ensure that they meet a range of admissions requirements: participants cannot be sex offenders, they must not have committed any serious institutional violations, and they must be drug free. The group's executive committee decides membership through a voting process. Current members are selective about who can join the program, because they do not want to take the risk of having anyone abuse the relaxed environment and, thus, place the future of the program in jeopardy. The elected officers also perform a range of other program-related responsibilities.

II. RESEARCH APPROACH

The primary objective of this study was to learn about the impacts of the LIFE program on children. The approach was to look at these impacts as seen through the eyes of their fathers. Direct interviews with participant children and their caregivers were not attempted due to logistical and administrative constraints. While a separate research activity was conducted to

¹ While there are a variety of family relationships between the adults, youth, and children who participate in the program, this report refers generally to the incarcerated adults as "fathers" and to the youth and children as "their children." This choice of language was made to simplify the wording of the report, and not to imply that father-child pairs are the only important participants in the program. When the report refers to individual participants, the specific nature of the family relationship is stated.

measure how participation in the 4-H activity affects the life skills of the children and youth in the program, additional research is still needed.

The research findings reported in this paper came from preliminary interviews with fathers, conducted more informally, followed by a formal focus group interview. The information coming out of these interviews provides a rich and detailed description of the fathers' perspectives on the ways their children and family have been affected by the program.

A. Field Observation and In-Depth Group Interviews

The evaluators met twice with the LIFE program fathers during the preliminary stages of the research. The first meeting was held in November 2000 during which the evaluator interviewed four LIFE program fathers in the presence of the PCC Institutional Activities Coordinator. The purpose of this meeting, which lasted about 45 minutes, was to learn the history and rules of the LIFE program and to find out what fathers saw as the important features of the program and its benefits for both the fathers and their children.

The second interview was held in August 2001, and it occurred immediately after a parenting meeting. The objective of this visit was to learn about the LIFE program, first through observation of fathers during program activities and second through an in-depth interview. This second meeting was held in the prison chapel and included seven fathers, the PCC Institutional Activities Coordinator, three UOE staff who manage the LIFE program, and the evaluator. The parenting meeting, which focused on positive discipline, lasted nearly an hour. The in-depth interview lasted for approximately 15 minutes.

The primary objectives of the interview were to 1) learn about the differences between visits in the traditional visit setting and the LIFE program setting and 2) determine which aspects of the LIFE program were particularly valued by the fathers. The in-depth interview followed a loosely structured interview guide. The first questions focused on the traditional visit setting, and were designed to elicit responses about visit atmosphere, the types of interactions that occur, and how fathers and their children feel during and after the visits. Following discussion of the traditional visit setting, fathers were asked similar questions about the LIFE visits. Detailed notes were taken at both of the preliminary interviews and used to design the focus group protocol.

B. Focus Group Interview

A focus group was conducted with LIFE program fathers in April 2002. It lasted for approximately one hour. The focus group meeting was held in the PCC prison chapel. There were seven people present: five LIFE program participants, the PCC Institutional Activities Coordinator, and the evaluator.

The focus group discussion was guided by a formal protocol consisting of questions about the LIFE program and its impacts on the children who participate in it.² The primary objective of the focus group interview was to elicit discussion about the LIFE program and the ways in which the fathers feel the program has affected 1) their relationships with their children and 2) their

² The research protocol is included as an appendix to this document.

children's well-being. Fathers were encouraged to discuss how their relationships with their children have changed since they joined the program, describe any changes that they have observed in their children as a result of program participation, and explain what they consider to be the reasons for those changes.

The focus group interview was tape recorded and later transcribed. The transcript was searched for information that could be coded into two categories: 1) characteristics of the LIFE program that contribute to positive impacts on children and 2) the types of positive impacts that children experience due to their participation in the LIFE 4-H activities. That information was then organized into categories, which is the way that it is presented in the next two sections. All of the names used in this report have been changed to protect the privacy of the program participants.

C. Research Limitations

The research methods used in this study were limited to the subjective assessment of impacts, as expressed from the fathers' perspectives. In other words, the results reported in the following sections were derived entirely from what fathers reported during the in-depth and focus group interviews. An alternative assessment of the impacts of the LIFE program is also available from a separate, but complementary, study that evaluates changes in the children's life skills. This study uses a survey to measure changes in children's skills in important areas such as goal setting, decision making, problem solving, communication, social skills, and self esteem.

These research findings could be strengthened by interviewing the children and other significant adults in their lives, such as caregivers and teachers, to determine their perspectives on the impacts of enhanced visitation programs. In the long run, valuable information on the impacts of enhanced visitation programs would be gained by following groups of children over several years to determine whether participation in different types of visitation programs is associated with any behavioral differences between the groups.

III. PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO IMPACTS

Fathers identified three types of program characteristics that lead to positive impacts on the children and youth who participate:

1. Atmosphere The atmosphere at LIFE program 4-H meetings allows for a more natural interaction between parent and child than occurs in the regular visit setting at PCC.
2. Constructive Interaction The 4-H activities promote constructive interaction between parent and child.
3. Parenting Education The parenting education component helps fathers to improve their parenting skills.

These characteristics can be viewed as program inputs: they are the elements of the LIFE program that make the program effective in leading to positive impacts on children. Each of these three characteristics is discussed in more detail in this section.

A. Visit Atmosphere

Fathers consider the setting and atmosphere to be of critical importance to the effectiveness of the LIFE program. Because PCC is a maximum-security prison, interaction in the regular visit setting must be strictly regulated. Children older than six are not allowed physical contact other than a brief hug at the outset of a visit. The correctional officers are close by, and both fathers and children can be preoccupied with concerns that the children might unintentionally break the rules. The visiting room can be crowded and noisy, and the setting is generally not conducive to communication. Fathers described the setting and atmosphere as “unnatural,” “uncomfortable,” “restrictive,” and “stress-creating” for both them and their children.

In contrast, descriptions of the LIFE visit setting were positive. Rules governing interaction are relaxed in LIFE meetings: there are no correctional officers present and participants are free to move around the room. The relaxed rules allow fathers and their children to interact in what they termed a “more natural” way. They compared the LIFE visit setting to being in a “living room” with their children. Fathers expressed that “children are more comfortable and open up” and that they and their children “can talk better and listen better,” and stressed that the relaxed, comfortable atmosphere in LIFE program meetings is conducive to positive interaction.

Physical contact is less restricted, so spontaneous hugs and sitting on laps are allowed. This contrasts sharply with the single hug that fathers and their children are allowed in the regular visit setting. Fathers especially value this aspect of the program because it allows them to express their feelings toward their children in a physical way.

Robert, who has a son and a nephew participating in the program, described the difference in atmosphere between the regular and LIFE visit settings:

On a prison visit, it’s kind of cold. These children – I don’t care if your child is five years old or 20 years old – he notices that you act different because it’s stressful. I mean, he’ll be down picking with his feet, you know, pulling his sock up or whatever. And I’ll tell him, “Don’t do that, they’ll have me over in a cage and they’ll be watching me.” Staff thinks that everything’s done for drugs, know what I’m saying? So I say, “Don’t be fidgeting under the table, fix your sock before you come up in here. Don’t be doing that.” He knows that’s a stressful type environment.

And then he’ll get a little rambunctious, he’ll want to . . . he’s 13 years old, but we’ve never had the chance to bond because when I got locked up he was five. He still wants to crawl on my lap, grab me around the neck. You can’t do that in a visit, not on the regular side you can’t. He understands it but he don’t know why. But when you go to 4-H, it is a little bit more relaxed. He can slide over there and put his arm around me. Or maybe take an old slug shot. You know,

they understand the differences in the meetings. It's important to them to have that.

B. Constructive Interaction

The LIFE program 4-H activities are selected to promote constructive interaction and co-learning between fathers and children. The activities are based on 4-H youth development curricula or other, similar youth and family development materials. They generally require teamwork, allowing fathers and children to set goals and accomplish them together. Recent meetings have included activities covering the following thematic areas:

<i>Trust</i>	Participants played pin the tail on the donkey, with children and fathers directing each other.
<i>Diversity and tolerance</i>	Participants read excerpts from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and discussed what the speech meant to them and how diversity and tolerance are important in society.
<i>Love and appreciation</i>	Participants made Valentine's Day cards to express appreciation for one another and other family members.
<i>Creativity</i>	Participants decorated Easter eggs together.

It appears that by organizing interaction around these themes, the 4-H activities help fathers and their children to relate to each other on a different level than when they simply sit across from each other in the regular visiting room. One father described how he feels after working on LIFE activities with his son: "You feel fantastic because you've done all these activities, you feel so much closer."

The activities give fathers the opportunity to provide guidance to their children. One father stated, "It feels like being a father. You're sharing a father-son relationship and accomplishing something with him." Fathers expressed that working on projects with their children helps them to feel closer to them than they do in the regular visit setting, and stressed that the activities help to solidify their relationships with their children.

C. Parenting Education

Fathers value the parenting component of the LIFE program and feel that their parenting skills have improved since joining the program. They expressed that the classes have helped them to learn more effective communication skills, better discipline strategies, and other skills that have had positive effects on their relationships with their children. In addition to the classes, LIFE fathers say that they support one another outside of the program, helping each other to work through family problems in a positive way.

In the following quotations from the focus group, David explains how lack of parenting skills is common among incarcerated fathers, and Grant describes how the LIFE program has helped to address that problem:

David: I personally learned that Randy don't need no friend, he's got enough friends. He needs a parent. . . . There's many guys that came in here and said, "We're all consistent with one thing: we don't know how to be parents." This is probably, you know, this is one of the first things that the administrators insisted that we go through, and it still remains probably one of the more important aspects of the program.

Grant: It's given us a unique opportunity to be better parents. You know, you take a lot of us; we've never had the chance to be parents. We got locked up when we was young. Through this program we learn to become better parents by interacting along with each other and with our children. We're getting better. You can feel it when you're on visit up there. You see dudes doing things we never dreamed of doing. They had me up there doing some cards. I never dreamed I'd be up there making no Valentine's cards [laughing]. It was good, it was good, you know?

IV. FATHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON IMPACTS

Fathers believe that participation in the LIFE program has led to significant positive impacts for their children. They feel that the program has helped them to forge stronger relationships with their children and given them the tools and opportunity to become a positive presence in their children's lives. The specific types of positive changes that fathers attribute to the LIFE program can be grouped into five categories:

1. Stronger relationships The development of stronger parent-child relationships through discovery, the development of mutual respect, and program activities that promote bonding.
2. Improved communication Improvements in the lines of communication between parent and child.
3. Family unity The creation and reinforcement of a sense of family unity between fathers, children, and caregivers.
4. Life skills The development of important life skills in the children, such as leadership, empathy, and self-control.
5. Improved behavior Improved behavior and academic performance by the children.

These five categories of impacts are described in more detail in this section, with examples provided by the fathers.

A. Stronger Relationships

Many of the LIFE 4-H activities help children and their fathers to learn more about each other, develop respect for one another, and establish more significant bonds. Working together as a team on 4-H projects gives children an opportunity to show their fathers that they are able and intelligent, and gives fathers an opportunity to show their children that they can provide capable and caring parental guidance.

Spontaneous activities are also important. Through unstructured interaction, children and their fathers can reveal their “fun” sides. Physical expression is particularly important: children and fathers are able to express their love for each other through hugs and other physical demonstrations of affection. The overall result is that children and their fathers develop healthier relationships based on mutual respect and love.

Robert, whose thirteen-year-old son was only five when he was incarcerated, feels that the LIFE program has helped him and his son (and his nephew who also visits) to learn more about each other:

All they knew was dad or uncle Robert on a [regular] visit where you just sit there. They don't get to see you actually . . . they don't get to see the side of me that they see in 4-H. They actually get to know you better. You know, whether it be through the crafts, or the games that we play. You know, my kid ain't never seen me lay down on the floor and pour water on my head. He just thought that was the greatest thing. Because when I came to prison he was only five – now he's thirteen. He just thought that was the coolest thing in the world – he'd never seen that side of me. . . . You come up to the [regular] visiting room and all you do is sit there and you look at each other and you don't really get to say anything. Then when he sees that side - like I'm a big old kid - you know, that's shocking to a child who's never seen that in his father.

You have a bigger type of a bonding situation. Like, when you meet them for a [regular] visit, you know, you're [only] allowed a hug. You know, in 4-H your kid can sit there with you, and lean on you. It's just more interaction and you have a bigger bonding process between father and son. And like my nephew . . . he doesn't have a . . . the only father figure he has in his life is his grandfather, who's my dad. And you know, now I'm starting to be more of a male role model in his life.

Robert sees the LIFE program as a discovery process for him and his child. The constructive interaction during activities and spontaneous physical interaction allow them both to express themselves in ways that would not be possible in the traditional visit setting. Robert appears to believe that this process of discovery has helped to solidify their parent-child bond.

David has had a similar experience with his child. He feels that the LIFE program has helped him to earn his son's respect:

In my case, I'm a stepparent, and Randy didn't even know me until he was seven years old. So, I wanted to be a positive influence on him, and this program has made a big difference in that area. Because accomplishing things as a family . . . he respects me more now and he's more inclined to listen to what I have to say, because he knows I can help him actually accomplish something.

David feels that the 4-H projects have given him the opportunity to earn his son's respect by demonstrating that he can help him to accomplish goals. By earning his son's respect and trust, he has put himself in a position to be a positive influence in his son's life. While LIFE program fathers are similar to fathers on the outside in the ways they want to influence their children, LIFE program fathers also have a unique concern: they do not want their children to end up in prison. Therefore, LIFE program fathers want to influence their children to choose a different path than the fathers themselves chose.

B. Improved Communication

Fathers related that the comfortable visit setting, the constructive interaction during activities, and the parent-child communication strategies they learned in the parenting meetings have helped them to establish improved lines of communication with their children. Since movements are not restricted, it is easier for children to engage their fathers in private conversation to talk about personal problems and issues or ask for advice. They can also express themselves through spontaneous physical interaction. Overall, by providing a more "natural" setting in which children and their fathers are free to interact in constructive and spontaneous ways, the LIFE program fosters the development of more meaningful communication.

Several fathers described how the LIFE program has contributed to improvements in their ability to communicate with their children. For Wade, who has two teen-age sons, asking for time alone with his children in the traditional visit setting can cause an uncomfortable situation. In the LIFE meetings, it is easier for him to pull his children aside for private conversation:

You know, you had to ask whoever brought them "Why don't you all go get something to eat?" . . . you got to do this in front of them which makes you feel bad because it's like you got to run them off. Now, if [the caregiver] is doing something [for a 4-H activity] [the child can whisper] "I want to talk to you." or . . . "Let's go see what's in the [vending] machine." And you just stand there hitting buttons, slowly putting quarters in so you all can have a discussion. . . . They're like [whisper] "Hey man, check this out, the other day . . ." and then, you know, [the caregivers] are looking like "What's up?" And you're like "Nothing, we were just talking about the game." "Y'all wasn't talking about no game." You know what I'm saying? But it's cool, because now they're wanting to talk, they're wanting to have that secret bond just you and them, and that's kind of cool, you know? . . . I was able to take my son away from my mother and wife and sisters and say, "Hey look man, I know you will be tempted to do this and do this" . . . In other words, you got that privacy . . .

Wade believes that the chance to have private conversations has created a stronger bond between him and his two sons and helped him to have more positive input into their lives.

Another father, Grant, explained that the parenting meetings and the LIFE meetings both have played a role in helping him to communicate with his son on important issues:

We've had problems within the group with certain individual kids. We come together [in the parenting meetings] and discuss the matter, you know, and come up with solutions. . . . Couple of weeks ago, my oldest boy was having girl problems. And you know, he won't talk around his mama. So I was able to pull him off and talk to him about it. And anything I don't know about I can get somebody else [in the LIFE group] to help me with. You know, they're getting up in age and there's a lot of questions.

I've had a better relationship with the boys [since joining the program]. They tell me about everything. They tell me more than they tell their mama, and she don't like that. Any kind of problem arise, if I don't call, they hold it until I do call, so they can tell me about it. If it's one of them kind of things like talking about girls or something, they'll take the phone because they don't want their mama to know they messing with girls. They'll go in the other room. You know, they have little questions, you know, they don't want her to know what it is - they go in another room. So she be mad - she don't like that.

Grant gains knowledge and support from the parenting meetings, and the LIFE 4-H meetings provide an environment in which he is able to apply his parenting skills and help his sons work through normal teen issues just as a father on the outside would.

Wade also attributes some of the improvements in his communication with his sons to the parenting meetings. He explained:

The parenting classes . . . would create an instance like "your son comes to you and says so and so and what do you do?" Break his neck. You know, you want to reach out and shake him: "Boy, you're crazy—you're going to end up where I am." And the class would be: "OK, here's another way to deal with this." Which, you always knew that way existed, you just never really gave it consideration because you felt other than hands-on confrontation that it wasn't going to work. . . . Where, like I said before it was like "Come here!" You know? The class has really - it calmed me down.

. . . my children now, where before I would say "look, your grandmother told me this or your aunt told me that or your mom said this" and they're like "yeah daddy, but man!...." Now it's more a thing like "Well, OK, but could you at least . . . ?" You know what I'm saying? It's more of a listening and "why don't you work with me on this" where before it was like "you don't understand because you're there [in prison]." Now we have the opportunity to remove that gap, like, [the child says] "I'm living it" [and I say] "OK, come up here and tell me about it.

Let's work through this," you know what I'm saying? That's the big difference. That bonds you with your child or nephew or whoever.

This passage implies that the parenting classes have helped Wade learn to listen and discuss issues and problems with his children rather than to react in a way that will close down the lines of communication.

David feels that as his stepson has learned more about him and come to respect him through interaction in the LIFE program, their ability to communicate has improved:

Now he wants to talk to me, you know? "Let me talk to David about this, let me talk to David about that." It wasn't that way at first. Of course it was a trust issue, you know, him coming into my life the way he did. But now, actually, that's getting to be more and more frequent every day. I mean, it's generally about stuff that he knows his mother's not interested in, like lifting weights, or stuff like that, or fishing, or something like that. That just really blesses my heart to be able to be a part of his life like that. I can remember when I first got involved with her and stuff. I'd call and say "Does Randy want to talk to me?" and he'd just straight out say "No, not really." You know? I mean, he didn't know who I was. He doesn't do that anymore. Now it's a totally different relationship, and a big part of that is of course time, some of it's time, but a lot of it has to do with this program. Like I said before, accomplishing things as a family has been a big part of that.

C. Creation and Reinforcement of Family Unity

Since the LIFE program also involves the children's caregivers, it strengthens the family ties between children, their fathers, and other family members. For some families, LIFE meetings have become anticipated events, and children, fathers, and caregivers have incorporated the LIFE visits into their family customs. Memories from past meetings and anticipated events in future meetings become an important focus of discussions between children, fathers, and caregivers. Even extended family members become interested, with cousins, aunts, and others asking for the opportunity to get involved. Families who participate in the program live with the grim reality of an incarcerated family member, some even facing the death penalty, and the LIFE program provides them with a positive focus around which to rally.

Wade spoke of how the LIFE program has had positive impacts on family unity:

. . . the children see us and our spouses or parents or whatever in a whole different light. . . . They have that mentality now like we ARE a family. You know what I'm saying? That's what it does. It pulls that family unity out that you can't do in the visiting room.

. . . I have two sisters, and they have children. They are now like "We want to go see uncle Wade." They're not worrying about the regular weekend; they want to come up to the 4-H visits. Because they're going back telling them "Man we so

and so and so and so.” “Did you know so and so?” . . . and my nephews are like “Uncle Wade, why we can’t come up?” and I’m like, “You can, but I’m trying to get [my sons] together first.” . . . I was glad to hear that. That really made me feel good.

My ex-wife and I are actually talking more. We are not trying to get back what we had or anything, but it’s one of those things, [she’ll ask] “when you all having that meeting, because I don’t want him yelling that I forgot to get him ready” and this kind of stuff. So, we actually talk more. She called my mother and [said] “Tell Wade I haven’t forgot his birthday, I just been kind of slow.” And she hasn’t sent me a birthday card in 11 years. And, I can call when they’re not there and “How you doing? What’s going on?” With his immediate caregiver, now, we’re kind of tearing down that wall where when I would call [in the past] its like “Hey, how you doing? I’m OK. The boys? There, just a second.” That was the end of my conversation. Now, you know, we’re a little more social.

David feels that one of the most important impacts of the LIFE program is the creation of family memories:

. . . he sees his parents in a normal loving environment, you know. I mean, a kid should grow up seeing his parents hug and stuff like that, you know, and just have physical interaction. . . . A big part of the memories that Randy is ever going to have of me are going be created right in this program. I mean, aside from sitting in an antiseptic environment in the visiting room where I go to the vending machine occasionally and get a hamburger, his only physical memories of me as an individual are going to be what he gains in this program. You know, this is going to be with him for the rest of his life, just like memories you have of your childhood will be with you for the rest of your life.

Wade added his thoughts on the importance of family memories:

For those people on death row, you know, this may be the last and only interaction we have. Unless some kind of reversal comes, this is it. And like David said, do you want him to remember you just, “That was my dad” or, “You remember when we was up in the visiting room and we wasted all that water on dad’s face?” or, “When dad tried to hula hoop?” We create memories every time, no matter how minute, we create a new memory every time we see them.

The fathers believe that the LIFE program has helped to strengthen family bonds. Children and their caregivers look forward to the LIFE meetings and the associated activities because they provide families with the opportunity to interact in a positive way and create fond memories.

D. Development of Life Skills

The LIFE 4-H activities are drawn from established curricula that focus on developing leadership skills, assertiveness, social skills, self-control, and awareness of others. Through these activities,

children and their fathers learn about and reflect on important life skills. These co-learning experiences provide children and their fathers with a foundation of knowledge that they can refer to as they work their way through life challenges and issues.

David shared his opinions about how the LIFE program and related activities contribute to the development of life skills among children:

Not only do I see a difference in him, but I see a difference in every child that participates in this program. All you have to do is just set back. I've seen kids come into this program who were totally antisocial for the first couple of meetings, you know, because they are expecting the same kind of behavior as in the visiting room, and they are told to respect the rules, you know, and everything, and they just open up, it's really an amazing thing to see a kid open up after he's been all, you know . . . [My son] Randy's more assertive, I think. A little more outgoing, I think, because of this program. He's always been the kind of child that's kind of shy. This program has kind of helped him with that social side to some degree. He's more assertive. He takes his role as secretary seriously. You know, he keeps roll, and does his thing there, and that's important to him.

For Robert, the planned activities provide an opportunity for him to help his son develop a sense of how his (the son's) actions affect others. His son is beginning to think about how what he does can make others feel, which has led him to exercise greater self-control:

As we sit back and analyze our kids, it gives us the chance to point out how they talk and interact with other people. Because 13-year-olds nowadays are buck wild. They say what comes to the top of their head. 4-H gives us a chance to provide input, to tell him, "If people aren't following along at the pace you want to go, just be patient, let things flow." So he's learning to watch his own self, and I guess mature with the things he says and does. Because, [in the] past few months he just pops off what's on top of his head. And now he's learning to control what he says. You know, think about what he says before he says it.

I think my son realizes how important the meetings are to me. I think that's the biggest change. He knows that these are really important to me. The last meeting he didn't get to be here. . . . and the first thing he thinks of is "my dad's going to be really mad." Not mad. A little disappointed. He knows I'm going to be disappointed, you know? So he didn't get to come and he knew that it was important to me. That's a big change for a kid to know that things are important to his father.

David described how his son has learned important lessons from LIFE activities:

We have a two-hour period to work with and we try to use that time period as productively as we can. We got to give the kids some time to assert their meeting thing and to work as a group, and maybe put a life lesson in there in the process. Whether it's through a puppet show or whatever it is. I use the puppet show for

an example because that was a life lesson that we used in 4-H that actually worked on Randy. He was going through this selfish phase. And so, I had the opportunity to help him to be the selfish puppet in the puppet show and it helped him to realize what being selfish was about . . . about how it had an impact on the other puppets, and it really had an impact on him. It may seem simple, but 20 years from now that life lesson might have something positive to do with his decisions.

E. Improved Behavior and Academic Performance

Each of the changes described above—stronger relationships, improved communication, greater family unity, and improved life skills—can have positive impacts on the social and academic adjustment of children who participate in the LIFE program. As communication and relationships between children and their fathers improve, children are more likely to discuss social and academic issues with their fathers, and fathers are better able to help their children work through those issues constructively. When family unity is strengthened, fathers and caregivers are more likely to cooperate in promoting their children’s social development and education. Life skills training provides children with tools and knowledge that they can use in their daily lives.

Grant explained how his children’s overall behavior and academic performance have changed since they began to participate in the program:

My kids used to stay in trouble at school, you know? Lately their grades have gone up. And it is all because of 4-H, you know what I’m saying? That interaction that we have with the kids, and stuff. Them being able to communicate with me a little better. Other than being on the telephone, or in the other visiting room. It’s just made it a lot better for them, you know? Their grades are up, they’re staying out of a lot of little bull that they’ve been getting in. Had been getting in, rather. It’s because of 4-H. Although it’s just once a month, it is still working.

Like six months ago, one of my sons got caught vandalizing a car [and] we talked about it. I brought the problem in and we talked about it. We talked about it, and went over solutions and everything. I tried the solutions, got rid of the problem, and it was all because of that being able to discuss it with everybody, you know? And he made a turnaround. You wouldn’t believe how that little talk changed it around. And that was six months ago. I mean his grades are up. He ain’t getting into no more stuff. I mean, it’s a hell of an improvement. It’s because I had that talk with him, but I got all my information from that meeting. Parenting classes are a great help.

Support from the other LIFE fathers and the parenting classes appear to have contributed to Grant’s ability to communicate effectively with his sons, allowing him to help them work through issues and solve behavioral problems.

Wade feels that the program has given him the opportunity to be a role model for his son by demonstrating that good behavior has its rewards:

To stay in the program you must stay in good standing with the institution. So it also makes us aware that, hey, if you want to continue this relationship with your children, you have to be on your best behavior, even under stressful conditions that we face on a daily basis. . . . They realize that at some point we make sacrifices so that this can be. I've told my middle son, twice, that "Man, do you know that I bite my tongue and turn the other cheek?" you know what I'm saying, I walk away more now than I have ever in the past, where I would be quick to say "Man I don't want to hear that." You know, and not looking for physical confrontations of any sorts. You know, I haven't had a violation for 2 years, trying to stay in this program - not even a small one.

By modeling self-control, even under stressful conditions, Wade sets a positive example for his sons. He summed up his feelings about why the LIFE program has positive impacts on children's (and fathers') behavior, "Because if you feel you're loved and you're part of something, you're less likely to get off into something that's going to get you into even more trouble. That's really what this is about."

V. CONCLUSION

There are a number of studies to indicate that the children of incarcerated parents suffer negative impacts and that the opportunity to visit their parents can have beneficial effects on these children. While there have only been a few research studies on the impacts of enhanced visitation programs, the findings from these studies suggest that such programs may lead to even greater benefits for children.

The LIFE program combines a less restrictive, more natural visit setting with structured activities designed to promote children's healthy development. Children and their fathers are allowed to move freely, express themselves physically, and interact spontaneously. The 4-H meetings include structured projects and activities that are based on proven youth and family development curricula. Outside of the 4-H meetings, fathers work on their parenting skills in both formal meetings and by informally supporting each other.

According to the fathers, participation in the LIFE program leads to numerous positive impacts on children. Fathers feel that the enhanced interaction in LIFE 4-H meetings has facilitated a process of learning and discovery and fostered the development of deeper bonds with their children. The curricula-based projects and activities help children and their fathers to learn about each other as the children develop life skills. The parenting meetings have given fathers new parenting skills and tools, and a greater understanding of what it means to be a father. This has led to better communication and overall improvements in their relationships with their children. The deeper bonds, mutual respect, and improved lines of communication have allowed fathers to become positive influences in their children's lives. Taken together, these positive impacts

mitigate some of the harm done to children from their parents' incarceration and help to improve children's social and academic adjustment and overall well-being.

The results of this evaluation of the LIFE program indicate that this enhanced visitation program has led to substantial positive impacts on the children who participate. The results are strong enough to warrant further study. If, as this study indicates, enhanced visitation programs can significantly help the children of incarcerated parents, then the LIFE program might provide a model for reaching and improving the lives of at least some of the large number of children affected throughout Missouri and the rest of the country.

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APPENDIX:

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

This research centers on the University Outreach and Extension's (UOE) Living Interactive Family Education (LIFE) program at the Potosi Correctional Center (PCC). The objective of this study is to assess the impact of the LIFE program on the quality of parent-child relationships and the well being of participant children. It is hypothesized that enhanced visits contribute to the quality of parent-child relationships. Better parent-child relationships, in turn, lead to happier, more successful, better-adjusted children.

Objectives: The focus group will elicit discussion of the LIFE Program and the ways in which the fathers feel the program has affected 1) their relationships with their children and 2) their children's well-being. Fathers will be encouraged to discuss how their relationships with their children have changed since joining the program, describe any changes that they have observed in their children as a result of program participation, and explain how these changes came about. Specific discussion areas will include:

- impacts on the quality of parent-child relationships
- impacts on children
 1. at home
 2. in school
 3. in the community

Description of the participants: The focus groups will be conducted with all of the LIFE program incarcerated fathers who consent to participate. Their children will not be present. If more than six program participants consent to participate, they will be separated into two or more groups. Aside from the participants, only the investigator will be present. If the Potosi Correctional Center deems it necessary, a prison official will also be present.

Informed consent: Informed consent forms will be distributed and collected by PCC or UOE staff prior to the focus groups.

Description of the focus group: The participants and the facilitator will sit in a circle or around a table for the discussion. The facilitator will begin the meeting by introducing himself and explaining that the purpose of the focus group session will be to learn about the impacts of the LIFE program on participant children. The focus group meeting will last between 30 and 60 minutes. It will be tape-recorded.

Scheduling the focus group: The focus group will be held either during the time in which parenting meetings normally take place or at another time as dictated by PCC staff. Thus, participating fathers may miss some or all of a parenting meeting. We will work with the PCC Institutional Activities Coordinator to select a time that is convenient for the participants.

Focus Group Discussion Guide: The following questions will provide the framework for the focus group discussion. While questions that are not listed here may be asked in order to follow up on participant responses, the focus group discussion will center on these main questions. The introduction and debriefing statements will be read to participants.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to find out how participation in the LIFE program has affected your children. We would like you to share your honest feelings about any changes, positive or negative, that you have noted in your children over the period of the program. Everything that you say here will be kept confidential, and your names, the names of your children, and any other identifying information will not be used in any report coming from this research.

We have a limited amount of time, so I might have to interrupt from time-to-time to keep things moving.

Opening question

Could each of you tell me your name and tell me how long you and your children have been involved in the LIFE program?

Introductory question

What motivated you to participate in the LIFE program?

Transition question

Could you name one important difference between a regular visit and a LIFE program visit and describe why that difference is important? (if responses are not forthcoming, explore specific areas - atmosphere, physical interaction, and communication)

Key questions

Do you think that being in the LIFE program has improved your relationship with your child in any way? If so, how?

Do you think that participation in the LIFE program has benefited your child in any way? If so, how?

Ending question

What are the most important changes that you have observed in your children since you joined the program?

Follow-up questions will be asked, when appropriate, to gather further information on perceived changes. If fathers assert that changes have taken place, the investigator will ask them *how* they think the program has contributed to those changes.

Debriefing

I would like to thank you for your participation. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any reports, displays, or other publicly accessible media coming from this research. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this research. Do you have any questions for me?