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Lessons From the Field: Developing and Implementing an Intervention for Jailed Parents and Their Children

Objective: *In this Lesson from the Field, we describe an intervention designed by our trans-disciplinary team focusing on opportunities for enhanced parent-child visits when a parent is incarcerated in jail. We present implementation challenges and lessons learned from our pilot feasibility study.*

Background: *Separation from one's parent because of incarceration has become an increasingly common experience for U.S. children, with one in 14 children experiencing a coresident parent leaving for prison or jail. Parental incarceration is associated with elevated risk for less optimal child development outcomes, yet few evidence-based interventions are available to mitigate this risk.*

Experience: *Our field experience underscores knowledge about intervention development and lessons learned in four areas: (a) use of visit coaching with jailed parents and caregivers, (b) application of video chat technology, (c) serving families holistically, and (d) developing family-focused services in jails.*

Conclusion and Implications: *Our study highlights the value of integrating multiple perspectives, ensuring flexibility with families,*

combining technology with enhanced support strategies, and collaborating with community organizations and government agencies. The intervention can be implemented without extensive training and can be useful across different family professionals working with families involved in the criminal justice system.

To help mitigate risks associated with parental incarceration and with the expectation that increased family contact will lead to improved postrelease success, we developed the enhanced visits model (EVM). The EVM is an intervention to connect children and their incarcerated parents using a combination of in-home video chat and visit coaching. The goals of this paper are to describe the intervention and present implementation challenges and lessons learned from our feasibility study.

BACKGROUND

Although few evidence-based interventions exist for children with incarcerated parents, they are urgently needed because of the large numbers of U.S. children impacted by parental incarceration and the risk factors these children face. At year-end 2017, there were 1.4 million individuals in state or federal prison and 745,200 in local jails (Bronson & Carson, 2019; Zeng, 2019). Importantly, most incarcerated men and women are parents to minor children,

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representing 52% of state and 63% of federal prisoners (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010) and even greater proportions of jailed individuals (Sawyer & Bertram, 2018). Research indicates that after controlling for other risk factors, there is a negative association between parental incarceration and child well-being, including elevated behavior and health problems, cognitive delays, and academic difficulties (Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Wildeman, 2009). Among children with incarcerated parents, most are under age 12 years (Haskins, 2016), and younger children are more often exposed to adverse childhood experiences than older children (Turney, 2018).

Research shows that for incarcerated parents, more contact with children is associated with less distress (Roxburgh & Fitch, 2014), fewer depressive symptoms (Poehlmann, 2005), less parenting stress, and more coparenting with at-home caregivers (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014). More generally, incarcerated people are at lower risk of recidivism postrelease when they receive more visits and have stronger family ties during incarceration (Mitchell et al., 2016). However, the findings regarding the relation between parent-child contact and children's adjustment is mixed, with some research demonstrating role reversal in children's drawings (Dallaire et al., 2012) and elevated behavior problems after face-to-face barrier visits in jail (Dallaire et al., 2015), but positive child outcomes linked to child-friendly visits (Poehlmann et al., 2010). The lack of consistent findings and evidence-based practices in this area prompted the development of the EVM and corresponding feasibility study.

We tested the EVM in a jail because of several differences between prisons and jails that matter for families. First, the most common type of incarceration in the United States is in jail, with 10.7 million admissions each year (Zeng, 2019). Second, research suggests that families are more likely to visit jails than prisons, in part because jails are located closer to where families live (Arditti, 2003). Third, compared with prisons, jails are more likely to offer visits through a plexiglas barrier with no physical contact (Shlafer et al., 2015), which can be stressful for children (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015). Fourth, although corrections-based parenting programs have offered child-friendly visits, they usually occur within prisons, not jails (for a review, see Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). Finally, jails tend to hold people for shorter periods of time

(usually 1 year or less) while awaiting conviction, sentencing, or transfer (Zeng, 2019), resulting in "churning" in and out of facilities and thus increasing the likelihood of negative impacts on children and families (Turney & Conner, 2019).

Intervention Model

We designed the EVM intervention using a transdisciplinary approach with researchers from developmental and clinical psychology, social work, sociology, economics, and design studies (Stokols et al., 2008). The purpose of the EVM is to increase opportunities for contact between children, families, and incarcerated parents and to improve visit quality, foster attachment and positive interactions, improve child and parent adjustment, and decrease recidivism. The intervention includes tablets provided to children and caregivers at home; an in-home video chat application plus free Internet access and technology support; and one-on-one in-home and in-jail coaching for caregivers and incarcerated parents to increase children's opportunities to have positive visit experiences. To be sensitive to the economic disparities that families often faced, we also included educational apps on the tablets (e.g., health, finances, parenting).

The EVM is designed for families with a focal child between the ages of 3 and 12 years. Using baseline interview data to ascertain information about children's development and experiences, we worked with jailed parents and caregivers to reflect on the developmental needs of their children and to help them provide age-appropriate parental support before and after video visits. Drawing from relational savoring, or the process of guiding individuals to focus on memories of intense positive connection with a close loved one (Borelli et al., 2020), we developed a coaching protocol to accompany the in-home video chats. The coaching sessions (delivered before and after the visit) were designed to help caregivers and incarcerated parents support children through the visiting process by seeing the visit "through the child's eyes." This is achieved through concentrated reflection about one's interactions with the child, thereby providing the focus on *relational savoring*. Parent-child separation, in addition to the carceral environment, can make visits challenging and full of intense emotions (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019). The coaching aspect was included

to help mitigate these challenges by drawing on the strengths of incarcerated parents and caregivers despite the separation, and helping them to recognize and actualize the powerful and positive influence they could have on the child.

Study Description

We conducted a feasibility study to develop and pilot the EVM with incarcerated parents who were 18 years of age or older, could speak and read English (fifth-grade level), had a child 3 to 12 years of age who lived within the county, had no child abuse convictions, anticipated being in jail for at least 4 weeks, and had an at-home caregiver interested in participating. Caregivers included biological parents, relatives, and legal arrangements with other caregiving adults. Parents who had a pending child abuse charge were assessed on a case-by-case basis; those who were legally allowed contact with their children were deemed eligible for participation after consultation with child protective services. Although parents were incarcerated for numerous reasons (e.g., nonpayment of child support, technical violation of parole or probation, arrest for a new crime), the information pertinent to enrollment was no prior child abuse conviction. Most individuals incarcerated in U.S. jails, including the parents eligible for our study, are not serving a sentence and instead are awaiting future court dates (Heard & Fair, 2019). As such, we could not determine when parents might expect to reunite with their children.

Study information was available to parents through flyers on tablets in the jail. Of all jailed parents screened ($N = 150$), 5 were ineligible, 17 of their matched caregivers declined to participate, and 95 experienced other participation issues (e.g., unable to contact caregiver, $n = 41$; jailed parent was released or transferred, $n = 45$; and other, $n = 9$). The EVM was delivered to 33 families, including 33 jailed parents, 33 caregivers, and 42 children who were given tablets and at-home Internet access if needed. Most participating jailed parents (70%) and caregivers (67%) received visit coaching. Baseline, postvisit coaching, and 3-month follow-up interviews were conducted. Implementation data were assessed to understand participant experiences and intervention feasibility.

EXPERIENCE

Our work thus far offers an opportunity to share challenges and lessons learned in four areas pertinent to practitioners and family life educators working with families involved with the criminal justice system: (a) application of in-home video chat technology, (b) use of visit coaching with jailed parents and at-home caregivers, (c) serving families holistically, and (d) developing family-focused services in corrections.

In-Home Video Chat Technology

We decided to use in-home video chat to connect children with their incarcerated parents because of its potential benefit that we theorize outweighs any disadvantages. Our decision draws from two strands of research: (a) developmental studies conducted with children who do not have incarcerated parents and (b) multidisciplinary studies conducted with children of incarcerated parents.

In the first research strand, a growing literature has focused on children connecting with relatives who live at a distance. For example, a study of young children found that families reported more benefits than challenges when using video chat compared with phone calls (Ames et al., 2010). Benefits for children included longer participation, expression of more positive emotion, and more engagement using gesturing, showing objects, and playing rather than verbalizing. Caregivers had to support children's involvement, however. They operated the technology, scheduled calls, ensured the child stayed in view, and corrected children's miscommunications.

Additional research has found that video chat is a positive way to support family relationships for children—even infants—separated from a parent, including military deployment (Yeary et al., 2012). Indeed, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2016) encourages video chat for all children, despite recommending against most other media use for children under 18 months. Furthermore, 95% of families with children 0 to 8 years own mobile devices (Rideout, 2017). As technology focusing on real-time video chat has advanced, many free video chat platforms are available (e.g., FaceTime, Skype, Zoom).

The second strand of research comes from recent multidisciplinary studies of children with incarcerated parents. Compared with other

forms of jail visiting, which typically use plexiglas or closed-circuit TV (Shlafer et al., 2015), in-home video chat is perceived as a normative experience for children, thus conferring less stigma (Poehlmann-Tynan & Pritzl, 2019; Tartaro & Levy, 2017). Observational studies have found that visits behind plexiglass are particularly difficult because of the barrier and absence of touch (Arditti, 2003). In-home video visits provide more privacy and fewer distractions for children than in-person visits, where visitors typically sit in close proximity and children spend much time watching other visits (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2015). Moreover, families do not need to pass through security or wait, and caregivers do not have to arrange or pay for transportation or travel to the facility.

In our study, families used jail-approved technology to remotely connect with incarcerated parents, rather than using one of the applications mentioned earlier. Apps such as those from ICSolutions (“Inmate Calling Solutions”) or “Getting Out” are used. They are downloaded for free, and families create an account at no cost. Visits cost about \$0.31 per minute (compared with phone calls at \$0.21 per minute), which is a drawback. Families often pay exorbitant fees to connect with incarcerated loved ones (e.g., Christian et al., 2006), often resulting in fewer visits for low-income families (e.g., Rubenstein et al., 2019).

Although corrections facilities are only recently offering remote visits, including in-home video chat, more incarcerated individuals have access to tablets than previously. Having tablets for incarcerated individuals’ use makes it easier for them to connect with families through email, messaging, or video chat. Some corrections facilities allow video chats to occur more frequently than in-person visits; for example, in our focal jail, in-person visits are allowed twice per week, whereas remote video chats could occur daily.

In addition to logistical challenges, connecting children with their incarcerated parents depends on other family relationships. Caregivers often function as gatekeepers of children’s contact with incarcerated parents (Tasca, 2016). For children to engage in remote visits with an incarcerated parent, they need the cooperation of a caregiver. However, caregiver–parent relationships are sometimes conflicted or even nonexistent (e.g., Tasca, 2016). Although our visit coaching was designed to help buffer

strained relationships, some caregivers resisted involvement in the program, hanging up on us or citing the parent’s preincarceration behavior as explanation for not participating. In a minority of cases, it may be in the child’s best interest not to connect with the incarcerated parent, as there has been child maltreatment or domestic violence.

A possible strength of offering more frequent family visits to incarcerated individuals is the potential association with institutional behavior and recidivism (e.g., Mears et al., 2012), although it is too early to detect these outcomes in our study. In addition, long-term effects on children and family relationships are unknown. Although previous research is mixed with regard to the effects of parental contact during incarceration on children’s outcomes, we expect that children will experience less stress and more positive relationships with in-home video chat as a supplement or alternative to plexiglass visits.

While our study is ongoing, feedback thus far from participants about video visits suggests promise. Incarcerated parents and caregivers have told us they like using a familiar interface (such as FaceTime), prefer not having their children at the jail, and perceive improvements in the quality of parent–child relationships because of regular (often daily) communication. Challenges included unreliable technology and strained parent–caregiver relationships that act as barriers to successful visits.

Visit Coaching With Incarcerated Parents and Caregivers

Visit coaching was provided to jailed parents and caregivers at least once before and once after a video visit. The sessions lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes, during which the interventionist asked participants to identify a positive moment with their children. We then asked parents to reflect on preset prompts focusing on sensory aspects and emotional content of the memory. For example, we asked participants to reflect on how moments together during video visits (or from an earlier preincarceration interaction) might contribute to the future parent–child bond. The goal was to increase positive emotions for the parent, facilitate a positive visit experience for the child, and prime feelings of parent–child attachment (Borelli et al., 2020).

An initial challenge faced in implementing visit coaching was logistical. Because the

coaching content can be sensitive, it was ideal to have some privacy, which was not always possible in the jail. We found it difficult for some parents to stay engaged when coaching was conducted in communal living spaces. Further, using an attorney booth, where plexiglas separated us from the parent, made it difficult to establish rapport. We learned that a better setting for visit coaching was meeting in a separate room, such as those used for programming. Along these lines, we found that establishing rapport was critical to having successful coaching sessions, and coaching tended to work best when conducted by someone who had interviewed the parent.

Timing was another challenge. The original goal was to offer multiple coaching sessions, before and after visits. Unpredictability in the jail and scheduling challenges with caregivers, however, made this an unrealistic goal. For practical reasons, we found that conducting one pre-visit and one postvisit coaching session was most feasible. Future research is needed to determine the number of sessions required for coaching to be most effective.

Coaching at-home caregivers also revealed challenges and successes. Caregiver–parent relationships were often complex. That, along with negative feelings about incarceration and protective feelings toward the child, sometimes resulted in caregivers focusing on negative aspects or feelings toward the incarcerated parent. Through visit coaching, however, caregivers recognized the important role they were playing in children’s lives through facilitating the child’s relationship with the jailed parent and being a stable support during a difficult time. This also seemed to benefit caregivers, both through recognizing their roles and sharing their feelings.

One key strength of the visit coaching protocol is that it can be administered by family professionals who may not have advanced degrees. Our entire team, including students, learned and implemented visit coaching. This makes it unique from many other parent–child focused interventions, which require specialized or licensed professionals. Although completion of data collection and analysis are needed to determine the full effects of visit coaching, it is a promising avenue for strengthening relationships between children, jailed parents, and caregivers during incarceration.

Parents, Children, and Caregivers: Serving Families Holistically

Prior interventions focused on families and incarceration have typically engaged one family member: the incarcerated parent, the child, or the child’s caregiver, but not all of them together. A unique aspect of the EVM is that it includes these family members in a holistic fashion. This is important because the incarceration of a parent leads to a disruption in the entire family (Arditti, 2016). This calls for a response that uses an integrated ecological family systems approach focusing on the whole family (Young & Smith, 2000).

This said, involving the entire family was difficult in some cases. Incarcerated parents were highly interested in the intervention study, but their complex family structures and circumstances made it challenging for some parents and families to participate. The reasons included resistance from caregivers, scheduling complications because of children living in more than one home, mobility among jailed parents (e.g., transfers to other jails or prisons), no-contact orders between parents and caregivers, and pending charges (rather than convictions) of child abuse. The issue of gatekeeping among caregivers resembles challenges observed in programs for divorced and separated parents where coaching parents to find conflict reduction strategies is crucial (Austin et al., 2013).

In addition to parent–caregiver relationships and caregiver resistance, some caregivers became homeless or moved frequently because of housing insecurity, making it difficult to connect with some families. Throughout the study, flexibility was needed to meet families where they were: public spaces such as parks, restaurants, and libraries, in addition to homes, apartments, and shelters.

Jailed parents also experienced mobility within the justice system. Our focal jail, along with many others, has separate housing units with varying privileges and programs. Our intervention is only available in the main housing unit. If a parent was transferred to another wing within the jail or to a prison, they had to be dropped from the study. Attrition also occurred when parents were released earlier than expected.

Another challenge in serving families holistically is when a no-contact order is in place or there are pending child abuse charges. We

worked with child protective services, consulted with attorneys, and enlisted the assistance of community organizations that specialize in supervising parent–child visits. The latter resource was particularly important when a caregiver could not help children video chat because of a no-contact order.

Family-Focused Services in Corrections

The development and implementation of family-focused services in corrections requires the engagement of multiple partners including corrections administrators, local organizations, and, in some cases, government agencies (Peterson et al., 2019). For lead agencies or practitioners, it is helpful to develop a sound understanding of corrections operations and establish strong working relationships with administrators. In our intervention, we relied on previously established partnerships between researchers and administrators to launch the project. This was important for obtaining initial buy-in from jail staff and to develop knowledge about the jail before implementation. Partnerships can, however, be developed even when preexisting relationships do not exist. For example, regular meetings, email exchanges, conference calls, and time spent at the jail can help establish communication and build knowledge to ensure program success.

Nonetheless, we ran into challenges with internal corrections communications. We learned, for example, that our agreements about protocols with the lead administrator could take time to reach everyone and that not all staff agreed with decisions made. This may be common when a program is new or stretches existing culture or resources. For instance, some deputies preferred that we interview incarcerated parents in the visiting room, whereas other deputies wanted us to stay in close proximity to the housing units where they were stationed. Given the uniqueness of jail settings, ranging from single, small county jails to multisite facilities in large cities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will succeed everywhere; flexibility is central to success. As in any collaborative effort involving multiple organizations, consistent and open communication can avoid delays, clarify goals, and overcome implementation challenges.

Although jails are designed for short-term stays, many of the millions admitted to jails each year languish while awaiting trial for crimes

for which they have not yet been convicted (Copp & Bales, 2018). The average length of stay (LOS) in larger and smaller jails, 34 days and 15 days, respectively (Zeng, 2019), suggests variation that offers opportunities for engagement in family-focused services. Family-focused programs can play a central role in jailed parent–child communication (McLeod & Bonsu, 2018), particularly in larger, urban jails where LOS may be longer. Even in smaller jails, tailored interventions offering brief parent–child–caregiver services can offer benefits to the whole family, especially when continued in the community. Similar strategies have addressed mental health and substance abuse problems with services that begin in jail and continue in the community after release (Spaulding et al., 2011).

Our challenges and successes illustrate the importance of taking time to develop partnerships with corrections administrators who can help make decisions and institute policies that ultimately support the development and implementation of family-focused services. It also highlights the need for institutional culture change, occurring through community-based partnerships that bring resources to help develop and sustain family-focused services for incarcerated parents.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We learned several lessons in developing and implementing an intervention for incarcerated parents and their children. First, it was critical for us to spend time developing the intervention and integrating many perspectives. Second, preliminary feedback from participants about using video chat for communication was generally positive, especially using a familiar platform, conducting visits from home, and having access to a communication mode that facilitates regular parent–child “chats.” Third, it was particularly important to provide visit coaching support in addition to technology (Peterson et al., 2019). Caregivers and parents appeared to benefit from reflecting on the child’s perspective and their roles in supporting children. Fourth, a strength of the coaching protocol is that it can be administered by professionals with varying levels of training and preparation. Fifth, flexibility in working with families was needed, especially meeting them where they were and recognizing the serious stressors they faced. Provision of

tangible assistance—including digital technology and accompanying resources—also helped engage families. Finally, collaboration with corrections was essential, including frequent contact, clear communication, responsiveness to emerging problems, and continuous discussion about culture change.

We also learned about future directions, including the importance of systematically embedding family services in corrections programming. Programs often pertain to incarcerated individuals without accounting for families, despite the importance of family connections for post-release success (Charles et al., 2019). Our transdisciplinary team will continue to ask questions about our intervention, such as “what works, for whom, how, and under what conditions?” and collect data about children’s longer term outcomes and parental recidivism so that we can better serve families affected by parental incarceration.

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