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Strengthening Parent-Child Relationships: Visit Coaching with Children and Their Incarcerated Parents

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Visits between children and their incarcerated parents can be designed to safeguard child well-being, promote a positive identity for a child, and provide continuity of the parent-child relationship or support the beginning of a relationship. This chapter describes visit coaching, an innovative approach to visiting between children and their incarcerated parents, and the therapeutic value of family centers located within prison and jail visiting rooms. Visit coaching and family centers in prisons and jails offer an attachment-based, culturally competent developmental framework to help incarcerated parents and children's caregivers better understand and meet the needs of their children and manage the uncertainties about the future due to incarceration, and to support children in navigating their relationship with their incarcerated parent.

The incarceration of a parent during childhood can have long-lasting effects on self-perception and behaviors that put children at risk (Felitti et al., 1998). Each risk factor a child is exposed to exponentially increases his or her odds of developing emotional and behavioral difficulties, including withdrawal, aggression, anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, substance abuse, sexual risk taking, and delinquency. Although many children overcome these odds and demonstrate remarkable resiliency, children of incarcerated parents are exposed to a greater total number of risks—parental separation, poverty, mental illness, parental substance abuse, and domestic violence—than other

children (Phillips & Gleeson, 2007). Tragically, children of incarcerated parents may end up incarcerated themselves. The isolation children with a parent in prison feel and their lack of access to their parents, rather than “the apple not falling far from the tree,” explains the increased risk these children face for negative outcomes.²

Many of the risks children face as a result of their parent’s incarceration are linked to being unable visit their parent, or when visits are afforded, are linked to the conditions under which the visits must take place. Although each child is affected differently by separation from a parent, three effects of having an incarcerated parent are commonly seen in children. The first is worrying, which may delay the child’s development. While other children are progressing in school and social development, the child of an incarcerated parent may be distracted by worrying about their parents’ safety and the uncertainty of their parent’s return. This worrying is made worse by the child’s exposure to media images of the dangers of prisons and jails. Even telephone calls may not mitigate these concerns, as children often need to see for themselves that their parents are being fed and cared for and are not being victimized in jail or prison.

Second, children of incarcerated parents often regress. Regression is a common consequence of trauma, with children’s developmental progress halting or sliding backward on developmental steps they were in the process of mastering. For example, young children who have been toilet trained may regress to the diaper stage. For older children, it has been hypothesized that they unconsciously delay milestones until their parent comes home, wishing not to commemorate birthdays, graduations, marriage, and other significant life events without sharing it with their parent. Although not all milestones can be celebrated in jail or prison, visits can go a long way toward helping children enjoy birthdays and other occasions with their incarcerated parent.

Third, children of incarcerated parents are often pushed into adult roles. “Parentification” of children may begin before the parent is incarcerated as a result of substance abuse or being overwhelmed by financial and/or relationship problems. Because of worries and responsibilities they are too young to cope with, these children may be more vulnerable to early problems with substances, school failure, and sexuality. Visiting room regulations exacerbate parentification by reversing the roles between child and incarcerated parent. For example, incarcerated individuals are not allowed to touch money, purchase items from vending

children are allowed to do these activities, the prison visiting rules require a role reversal between parent and child.

Supportive visiting programs for children of incarcerated parents and family centers inside prison and jail visiting rooms can mitigate these and other negative effects of parental incarceration on children.³ Programs such as the Bedford Hills Teen and Summer Visiting Programs, New York City child welfare agency’s Children of Incarcerated Parents Program, Hour Children’s visiting programs, the Osborne Association’s Family Ties and FamilyWorks programs, and others around the country support children and their incarcerated parents to have more child-focused, age-appropriate, happier visits and strengthened relationships that benefit the child’s development while the parent is in jail or prison, as well as easing the return to the community.

How these programs are designed and offered is as important as what the programs are. A program’s underlying beliefs and philosophy will impact its effectiveness. For this reason, the authors want to say a word about language. This article intentionally uses the words “visiting” and “visits,” not “visitation,” to describe the time that children and their incarcerated parents have together. After decades of working with families in various situations of separation, the authors believe the term “visitation” conveys a legal, formal situation that visit coaching and family centers in jails and prisons are designed to purposely avoid. This has been confirmed for us by children who have told us, “Normal people don’t have visitations. They go to visit Grandma or Dad or Uncle.” In keeping with feedback from families and the philosophy behind visit coaching and family centers, we believe this shift in language is not merely semantic, but critical to supporting children and their incarcerated parents.

Similarly, it is important to be mindful of the language we use to refer to children’s incarcerated parents. Terms that appear frequently in the media such as “inmate,” “convict,” “offender,” and “criminal” are stigmatizing for children who are struggling to figure out who their parent is, to reconcile their complex and often conflicting feelings about the parent, and by association, about themselves. Although with respect to their unlawful behavior, society has designated them as “offenders” and the prison system calls them “inmates,” but to their children they are still “Mom” and “Dad,” and it is important to honor this relationship and the children’s experiences, attachment, and feelings. Saying “Mom,” “Dad,” “parent who is incarcerated,” or a “formerly incarcerated person” is more helpful to children (Ellis, 1994).

This chapter consists of six sections. The first section introduces visiting as an under-utilized therapeutic intervention for children of incarcerated parents. The second section summarizes the challenges of visiting in a correctional setting. The third section presents the attachment and other developmental needs of young children and teenagers who visit their incarcerated parents. In the next two sections, the effectiveness of visit coaching with children and teenagers and their incarcerated parents, and of family centers in jails and prisons is described in detail. The last section provides guidance for implementing visit coaching and family centers in jails and prisons.

VISITING AS AN UNDER-UTILIZED THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION FOR CHILDREN OF INCARCERATED PARENTS

When children do not live with a parent, visits are essential to maintain their relationship. Visiting as a consequence of parent-child separation is seen as routine in the context of divorce, but less so in the aftermath of a parent's incarceration. The negative assumptions about a parent by virtue of their incarceration often interfere with professionals and others viewing the situation from a child's perspective and a developmental, attachment lens. In addition to the benefits of visiting for children separated from a parent for other reasons, when a parent is incarcerated, visits also allay a child's worries about their parent and can help address the child's feeling of being stigmatized.

The benefits children derive from visiting their incarcerated parent vary depending upon the child's developmental stage, individual family circumstances, and the child's prior relationship with his or her parent. For example, for infants and young children, visits build their attachment to their parent and are essential to establishing a relationship. At this young age, phone calls or letters are not enough to solidify a relationship. For elementary school children, visits make them feel loved, answer questions about the parent's absence and safety, and can also dispel self-blame the child may be burdened with. For teenagers, visits help in their complex process of developing a positive identity and resolving anger and disappointment they feel toward their incarcerated parent.

Visits can be important and valuable whether or not the child lived with the parent prior to incarceration. An assumption is often made that because children with an incarcerated father (less frequently with an

incarcerated mother) may not have resided with their parent prior to the parent's incarceration, there was no parent-child relationship worth sustaining or strengthening. Reports from children who have been kept from seeing their parent in prison coupled with descriptions from those who have visited their incarcerated parents attest to the importance of making these child-parent relationships possible. As they get older, children will define their family relationships based on their experiences, and not having been totally separated from a parent—and having opportunities to create memories through visits—will be beneficial. For this reason, visits can be important even if the child and parent have been estranged.

For incarcerated parents, visits with their children are also important. Visits provide opportunities to demonstrate their love for their children, give their children a sense of belonging, be a positive model for their children, explain to their children choices they regret that resulted in incarceration, and participate in their child's education and development. In some prisons and fewer jails, incarcerated parents have completed parenting and other classes that promote self-awareness and growth while in prison and provide the information, motivation, and skills to be outstanding parents to their children despite their limiting circumstances and past behavior. If their children are in foster care, visits are crucial to incarcerated parents retaining parental rights.

Without visit support, incarcerated parents may not know how to prepare for visits and may have difficulty managing their own feelings or responding to the varied needs of their children when they see them. Without support before and after the visit, children may feel confused and rejected despite the incarcerated parent's intention to be loving and build the child's confidence in their relationship. Without support, the caregiver may not know how to help prepare the child or how to interpret and handle the child's reactions to the visit afterwards. If siblings live in different homes but come to the same visit as a family, this can add to the complexity of the situation for the children and their incarcerated parent, as well as the caregivers.⁴ In addition, the uncertainties surrounding the next visit and the parent's return to the community can also undermine visits.

Visit coaching provides critical before and after support for all involved with the visit. It is an effective model for maintaining relationships through separation, rebuilding relationships, and for establishing relationships between parents and children who have been estranged.

CHALLENGES OF VISITING IN A CORRECTIONAL SETTING

In contrast to visits between noncustodial parents and their children in the community, visits in jails and prisons present many obstacles to positive interaction. Distance, transportation challenges and cost, facility rules, and concerns of caretakers can all result in infrequent contact, which increases the guilt of the incarcerated parent and makes maintaining the parent-child connection more difficult.

A significant obstacle to visits with incarcerated parents, whether the child is living with a relative or in foster care, is the commonly held view that going to a jail or prison is harmful for the child, and/or seeing a parent whose release date is uncertain would be upsetting to the child. This view may prevent family members, caseworkers, and foster parents from telling children the truth about where their parent is. It is not uncommon for children to be told their parent is at college, away working, in the military, or in the hospital. Although motivated by protective intentions, these lies are often exposed and damage children's trust in their caregivers more than they serve to protect them. Most children eventually discover that their parent is incarcerated, and whether this is immediately or years later, uncovering the lie they were told has greater negative consequences than had they been told the truth. Children may not have the same negative associations with incarceration as adults do; the truth gives them a reality to come to terms with and maintains their trust in those they rely on for their care.

Furthermore, an incarcerated parent's extended absence can affect permanency for the child, but keeping the child and incarcerated parent from visiting is likely to be harmful and is not reasonable, even given the desire of relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers to have stable living arrangements for the child.

Once children know where their parent is and visits are considered, adults may worry about the hardship of a long trip to the prison or jail and the impact on the child of entering the facility through razor wire, metal detectors, and guards who may look like police officers. But children's responses are primarily determined by adult reactions. If the adult behaves as if the visit is an adventure and a wonderful reunion, the child is much less likely to be upset than if the adult's body language and words convey anger, shame, being inconvenienced, and negative views of the prison surroundings. It is crucial for relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers to have support to remember the importance of visits for the child in maintaining their relationship with the incarcerated parent,

even though the visit may also stir up feelings in the child that their caretaker will have to manage.

Another major obstacle to visits with incarcerated parents is distance and transportation. Correctional policies in most states do not take into consideration proximity to children and family in prison assignment decisions; incarcerated parents are frequently transferred to different prisons without prior notice. It is not easy for families to arrange affordable transportation to facilities that are miles away, often in hard-to-reach rural areas. Many families do not have cars and rely on public transportation that does not go to places many prisons are located. Cabs, trains, buses, and airplanes are too expensive for some families. If a caregiver has to pay for transportation per child, they may leave some or all of the children at home. Many foster care systems have not made provisions for paying for transportation by caseworkers or foster parents to jails and prisons. In most households where there is more than one child, managing school, medical care, religious life, daily chores, and recreation is so time-consuming that taking a half or full day or more for a visit to a distant jail or prison seems inconceivable.

Another deterrent to visits is the embarrassment of many adult family members about having a relative in prison. They may be concerned that they will be seen at the prison by people from their community or workplace. The demeaning process of entering the prison may exacerbate their shame. Both to avoid their embarrassment and protect the child, family members may avoid visiting and may be encouraged to do so by the incarcerated parent, who wants to spare their loved ones the shame. The fear of outstanding warrants for child support or unresolved criminal matters or worries about deportation may also keep family members from visiting, and they may not know how to find out the facility's rules for arranging for another adult to take the child to visit.

Correctional facilities were not set up with children in mind. The fact that most incarcerated people in the United States are also parents (close to 80% of incarcerated women and 66% of incarcerated men are parents) is not reflected in the regulations that govern jails and prisons, including their visiting rooms. This poses challenges for incarcerated parents and others trying to arrange and support positive visits. Every prison has its own set of complicated visit regulations and schedules; although some have certain rules in common, there are enough variations between facilities (even in the same state) that many families have experienced traveling long distances only to be turned away because of their clothing, insufficient ID, arriving on the wrong day, or for other

reasons. Especially if family members do not have access to online information, it can be difficult to get the correct telephone number for the facility and to ascertain when visits can occur, what age and how many children are permitted, what documents must be brought to the visit, and what cannot be brought to the visit. Visiting days and hours may vary from facility to facility, even within the same state, and some facilities only offer alternate weekends for visiting based on the first letter of the last name.⁵ Having to arrive at the right entry, arriving at the right time, waiting in lines, and being put off by what may be perceived as an unwelcoming attitude by prison staff can also make a relative or foster care worker avoid taking the child to visit their incarcerated parent.

Upon arriving at a prison or jail for a visit, long waits to be “processed” (often outside in inclement weather with no awning or chairs) and poor visiting environments lacking toys and books for children and offering little privacy can result in the parent and children being at their worst during the visit. Relatives may be upset to find themselves visiting with a shackled parent. If the visit is a non-contact visit (common in most jails and many prisons across the country) and has to occur through glass or a wire/gated divider, both the parent and the child may be frustrated by the lack of physical contact and the inadequacy of a telephone for communicating. For young children in particular, these visits may be confusing if they see their own reflection in the glass and difficult because touch and proximity are critical for them to maintain their relationship. The message conveyed by such visits is that their parent is dangerous and is caged like an animal.

Many of the rules within a prison or jail visiting room are also counter to the ways children and families spend time together. For example, sometimes visiting children get to know one another and want to interact during their visits or have their parents meet. In most prisons, this is referred to as “cross-visiting” and is prohibited. Prison rules also ban incarcerated parents from changing their babies’ diapers or taking their children to the bathroom, which can be confusing to explain to a young child. Additionally, in visiting rooms that do not have family or children’s centers (designated child-friendly play areas), there is often nothing for children to do or anywhere for them to go, and often their caretakers are not permitted to bring even small toys or markers and paper into the visit to entertain them. Children may be required to sit still in adult size metal chairs for long periods of time. Sitting on their incarcerated parent’s lap may not be permitted. These are not developmentally-sound expectations and can make the visit an upsetting or

frustrating struggle for everyone involved. As a result, the family, parent, and correctional staff may come to the conclusion that visits are not good for children, when in fact it is the inflexible visit rules that are not child-friendly. Visit coaching and family centers are designed to support the parent-child relationship in part by modifying the correctional visiting environment.

Furthermore, older children and teenagers may think visits to a distant prison or jail are too time consuming because they have their own busy lives. They may say they are reluctant to visit or their interest in visiting may be masked by anger at their incarcerated parent. Instead of accepting these ideas at face value or labeling them as teenage “resistance,” it is important for adults to discuss the pros and cons of visiting their incarcerated parent with the teenager and come up with visit arrangements (and phone calls and letters to supplement infrequent visits) that respond to the teenager and also meet his or her long-term needs.

Suzanne, a 14-year-old girl in foster care, was asked by her caseworker if she wanted to visit her incarcerated mother over the coming weekend. She said “No,” and the conversation went no further. The caseworker was relieved, as she found the visits to the prison exhausting and upsetting. She did not ask why Suzanne said “No” (which was because on that weekend there was a big party for which she and her friends had been preparing). The caseworker also took this “No” as indicative of Suzanne’s future interest in visiting and did not ask again for months. Suzanne wanted to visit her Mom to tell her about the party and catch her up on school and friends, but thought she was only allowed to go when the caseworker brought it up and made arrangements.

Older children or teenagers may be angry or feel awkward visiting with their parent. They may not know what to say or may be afraid of their emotions (anger, rage, sadness, fear). In these situations, a visit coach who functions as a mediator can be helpful, and can point out to adults concerned about the visit that not all valuable contact between a teenager and their incarcerated parent is in the form of “easy visits.” Supported visits have therapeutic value for older children and teens, including in situations where the parent and child have been estranged.

Teenagers may want to visit their incarcerated parent, but not know how to set up a visit if their caretaker objects or is unable to accompany them. Although some prisons allow children age 16 and older to visit their parent unaccompanied, or outside organizations may be willing

to accompany the child for a visit, many caregivers and teenagers do not know this and it can be difficult to navigate the criminal justice system to discover such information. Even when teenagers can visit unescorted, in many instances they benefit from a visit coach or someone to support them and help them process their feelings before and after the visit.

If children are living with family members, the relationship of the caretaker and the incarcerated parent is a key to visit frequency and satisfaction. If the relative has a positive relationship with the incarcerated parent, they may be much more motivated to bring the child to a jail or prison visit. When children are brought to the visit by an adult with whom the incarcerated parent has a relationship, the nature of the relationship will affect how the parent relates to the children—if the adult is a loved one, the incarcerated parent may be torn over how to divide the visit's precious time; if there is friction between the adult and the incarcerated parent, the visit may be tense or awkward; if the adult is a representative of a foster care agency, the incarcerated parent may have many questions that take up time in the visit. If the child is living with a relative or in a foster home where the incarcerated parent is viewed as a negative influence on the child, the incarcerated parent may be preoccupied by fears the child has been “poisoned” against them. Incarcerated parents may require special support to manage visits with children who are accompanied by relatives who are hostile to them.

If the children are in foster care, visits in jails or prisons can occur through special programs, individual case workers, or the foster parents. Many foster care systems are overwhelmed arranging visits for parents and children in the community and do not have visiting programs for incarcerated parents. Many case workers and foster parents are not trained about the importance of children visiting with their incarcerated parents or provided with guidance for how to arrange such visits. They may believe that until it is certain when the parent will return to the community, it is pointless to “get the child's hopes up” by having a visit. Even when caseworkers and/or foster parents want to support the parent-child relationship, visits may simply seem too challenging and time-consuming given the distance, process, perceptions of prisons and prisoners, and sometimes previous negative experiences.

Correctional Officers assigned to visiting rooms rarely receive training to address these difficult issues. Their priorities and training are in the areas of security, safety, and custody. They are trained to view visitors as potential contraband carriers, including infants. The absence of training about family dynamics, child and youth development, and the

attachment needs of children may increase the tension during visits, as officers may misread a family's actions, particularly affection.

THE ATTACHMENT AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS VISITING INCARCERATED PARENTS

The trauma of separation from a parent can cause disturbances of emotional regulation, social relationships, attachment, and communication. This may be made worse if the child has experienced other significant losses, abuse, or exposure to violence. Trauma typically slows down development in children and can interfere with all aspects of the child's functioning. Traumatized children often have trouble concentrating in school, are fearful, and may seem emotionally detached. Children who have been separated from their parent often blame themselves and may have trouble forming other relationships. Children need their parents to protect them from harm as well as to ensure a relationship through which they can learn to regulate themselves and form other relationships. Children also look to their parents to teach them values and interpret the world for them. As a result, when the parent and child are separated for long periods, this can be a far more significant loss than for an adult.

“Exposure to trauma . . . interferes with children's normal development of trust and later exploratory behaviors that lead to the development of autonomy” (Ososky, 2004, pp. 5–6). Disrupted attachment has been linked to irritability, protest, search for missing parents, clinginess to caregivers, diminished appetite or food hoarding, disrupted sleep, and anger. Depending on a child's unique temperament, his or her response to loss can range from defiance to withdrawal. These reactions in the child may wear down the caregiver or foster parent, leading to their emotional withdrawal when the child desperately needs their attentive-ness to develop trust.

Reactions to loss, and especially the unique loss of having a parent incarcerated, may significantly interfere with the child's life, although the symptoms of most children of incarcerated parents do not meet the current criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The particular nature of children's loss of parents to incarceration—with its stigma, ambiguity, and lack of social support—is also unfortunately little studied and not well understood. Even if they are in a loving home with a relative or foster parent, many children separated from their incarcerated parent

need, but do not receive, trauma treatment to support a return to normal development and reduce the likely continuing effects of disrupted attachment, especially fears of abandonment, trust issues, and problems with depression and aggression. The incarcerated parent, families, and foster families also require and often do not receive guidance in responding to children suffering loss.

The child's caregiver and the child's incarcerated parent may overlook the child's feelings because they think the child is too young to be reacting to loss. The incarcerated parent may have so much grief and guilt about not being close to the child that he/she has difficulty being sensitive and responsive to the child. They may have their own trust issues and may not really understand their child's needs. They may minimize the child's feelings because they believe this is the way to teach the child how to be tough to survive in a difficult world. They may simply not know how to respond to their child, and feeling frustrated and helpless, they may shut down.

A further complication incarcerated parents may have is responding to their child's chronological age and/or physical size, rather than understanding their child's attachment and other developmental needs. As discussed above, children with an incarcerated parent may be lagging developmentally or may take on adult roles. Children may appear to be grown, particularly those who move quickly into adult clothing, makeup, and tattoos. The parent may have unrealistic expectations for their children.

Ms. C is a 23-year-old mother serving a three-year sentence after a drug bust in her apartment. Her mother is caring for her 2-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter, and brought them to visit in prison. This was the first time they had seen their mother in months. Her son sat quietly on his grandmother's lap sucking on a bottle, not making eye contact with his mother, and appeared not to recognize her. Her daughter clung to Ms. C, but when she started doing her daughter's hair, the little girl lashed out at her, crying and asking why she never came home. Ms. C's mother has health problems and looked more worn-out than when they saw each other in court, and Ms. C wished they had more privacy and time for her to show concern for her. At the end of the visit, Ms. C was full of regrets, feeling rejected by her son and awful when her daughter had to be pulled away from her, pleading for her to come home.

No one prepared either Ms. C or her mother for the children's responses to separation from their mother, which could have been predicted given their ages and temperament. Had Ms. C been helped to anticipate their reactions, she would have taken them less personally and

been able to respond to her 2-year-old's need for reassurance and her 4-year-old's need for affection and simple explanations of her absence. Both her 2- and 4-year-old also had attachment needs that had to be met in different ways, without Ms. C feeling overwhelmed with sadness that she had to rebuild their relationships. Both children needed to play with their mother, but understandably she got distracted by the 2-year-old's regressed behavior and the 4-year-old's protests; there were no toys or books available to make play easier, nor photographs to provide the children with something concrete and lasting from their mother to take away with them. Preparation and more contact through telephone calls and letters might also have helped Ms. C express compassion for her mother without taking too much time from the visit with the children. Having a visit coach help Ms. C prepare for all of this and help their grandmother support the children would have enhanced their visits.

Teenagers also have attachment and other developmental needs that are difficult for their incarcerated parents to meet during visits. The teenager's love, anger, and uncertainty about their relationship may be hard to decipher because of typical adolescent immature thinking and identity. The teenager may say things without thinking or may minimize his or her risk-taking when the parent inquires about friends, school attendance, or substance use. The parent may worry that the teenager's clothes, hair, or piercings indicate an undesirable identity rather than experimentation. Without preparation, the incarcerated parent may express disapproval rather than support, interest, and praise for the teenager. Wanting to be parental, the parent may anger the teen by giving advice or making punitive comments, which often escalates into an argument as the teenager questions the parent's right to play this role after having abandoned him or her.

Mr. S is a 30-year-old father who has been incarcerated for 12 years for his involvement at age 17 with a group of friends who severely injured another teenager in a fight. His son, a baby when Mr. S was arrested, is now 14 years old and has been raised by his mother and maternal grandmother. They were angry at Mr. S, had limited transportation, and did not bring his son to the prison more than 100 miles away from where they lived. Over the years, Mr. S wrote letters to his son, which were not answered, and he was not sure they lived at the same address or whether his son got the letters. Mr. S says he has grown up in prison and he is proud of his accomplishments, completing a GED program, becoming a respected leader, and serving as the chaplain's assistant for years. Mr. S has been moved to a prison closer to home, and hopes to be released in the next 18 months. Mr. S's younger

brother is now visiting more, and agreed to contact his son's mother to get permission to bring him on some visits. Mr. S gave a picture of himself and a letter for his son to his brother. He cried when he received his son's picture and a description of his son's school progress and home life.

It is commendable that Mr. S worked so hard to arrange contact with his son. But it is apparent that a visit of a 14-year-old with a father he has not seen since infancy presents many challenges. Mr. S was nervous about the visit, believing his son knew nothing about him except his offense and criticism from his mother and grandmother. He wanted the visit to be the beginning of a wonderful father-son relationship. He hoped he would get released, get a job, begin to support his son, and provide a home for him. He worried because his brother told him his son's grades had been going down, he lived in a high-crime neighborhood with a lot of gangs, and he had not been brought up in the church. He did not know what his son's feelings were about him. Mr. S needed support in separating his ambitious hopes for visits from his son's needs, to figure out how he would respond to his son's views about having a father who loves him and his anger about his father's absence, to spend most of the visit showing an interest in his son's life, and to avoid criticizing his son (or his mother) or putting too much pressure on him to move quickly into a new, close relationship. Having a visit coach help Mr. S prepare and support his son would greatly increase the likelihood of this significant first visit, and those that followed, being a mutually positive experience.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VISIT COACHING WITH CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS AND THEIR INCARCERATED PARENT

Visit coaching is an exciting innovation in family visits with children who are separated from their parent. The visit coach actively supports the incarcerated parent to meet their children's unique needs and capitalize on their strengths as a family.

Visit coaching includes

- helping incarcerated parents identify and prepare for their children's feelings and behaviors in visits.
- supporting incarcerated parents to take charge of their visits and plan specifically how they will meet their children's needs.

- helping incarcerated parents identify their strengths in responding to each of their children and their unique relationship despite their separation.
- assisting incarcerated parents in coping with their feelings in order to keep their guilt, sadness, anger, helplessness, and ambivalent or negative relationships with the child's caregiver from undermining positive visits with their children.
- supporting children before and after their visits with their incarcerated parents.
- facilitating co-parenting by helping incarcerated parents, relatives, foster parents, and caseworkers have a shared view of each child's needs and improving communication among these figures in a child's life.

Visit coaching is a valuable service for incarcerated parents because it is a hands-on approach applied directly to their children. Although parenting classes can also address techniques for meeting children's needs and bolster a parent's skills and understanding of their children, visit coaching is more individualized and brings a specific set of strengths-based, child-focused, parent empowerment values to its practice. The two approaches can work together, but unfortunately, parenting classes remain rare in correctional facilities.

Incarcerated parents appreciate having a visit coach provide encouragement before, after, and ideally during visits to build on what they already know. Visit coaches intentionally support parents' own approaches to meeting the unique needs of their children—rather than directing

Table 8.1

BENEFITS OF VISIT COACHING IN JAILS & PRISONS

- Visit coaching is based on a belief that incarcerated parents can overcome sadness, guilt, and other obstacles to make visits happy for their children.
- Visit coaching is an important way to reduce the effects of loss and harm of separation on children.
- Visit coaching encourages the family's cultural preferences in commemorating milestones and other traditions.
- Through visit coaching, incarcerated parents practice the lifelong habit of asking "What does my child need?" and flexibly adjusting their parenting to meet those needs.

