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## Parental guidance

Dane County hopes to help inmates be better parents

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John recently watched one of his friends leave the confines of their pod in the Dane County jail and go into the visitation room to spend time with his child. Seeing his friend and other inmates read to their children was a brutal reminder that John hadn't seen his daughter in more than three months.

John — who has been given a pseudonym — was arrested on domestic abuse charges in November 2018, just a month after his daughter was born. Since then, he's had only limited communication with her. In March, the mother of his daughter stopped all communication with him, blocking his calls and refusing to bring his daughter to visit.

He knows all too well the impact his absence will have on his daughter. As a preteen, he was abandoned by his own father and taken in by an uncle. "She won't have that father figure there and that affects kids," John says. "When they are young, that's when they need you the most."

Awaiting trial, John could face up to three years if he's convicted. John says he is dedicated to using his time in jail preparing to be a good dad. So when a fellow inmate told him about a new parenting program, he eagerly signed up.

The Dane County jail started the pilot, Parenting Inside Out, in February. The 12-week program provided six inmate fathers, including John, training on parenting skills in hopes of

improving family communication and reentry into home-life.

PIO is an evidence-based program that incorporates role-playing, peer discussions and coaching. The curriculum focuses on problem-solving, positive reinforcement and non-violent discipline.



Pajarita Charles, an assistant professor in the UW-Madison School of Social Work, says PIO was introduced by the National Institute of Corrections to improve family connections with inmates. Dane County jail was selected as one of five pilot sites nationally to develop and or modify family connection services. The Dane County jail partnered with UW-Madison School of Social Work and UW Extension to implement the pilot, with funding from the UW Extension.

“PIO was adapted to address the unique challenges that criminal justice-involved parents face,” Charles says. “The idea is to help them develop communication skills so they can effectively be present and in their own children’s lives, even when faced with incarceration and the complexities that come with the reentry process.”

**The complications that families face** when a parent is incarcerated can often have a long-term influence on a child’s development.

According to Julie Poehlmann-Tynan, a professor of human development and family studies at UW-Madison, between 25 to 45 percent of children of incarcerated parents watched their parent getting arrested. This trauma can lead to increased stress, anxiety and depression. Nationally, 60 percent of incarcerated women and 50 percent of incarcerated men are parents.

In children younger than 5, Poehlmann-Tynan says, this trauma can affect language and cognitive development. “Babies have a way of remembering trauma in their bodies, so even if they don’t have a narrative memory they may have an overdeveloped fear system because of trauma.”

The trauma that these children face is often ongoing, Poehlmann-Tynan says, as incarceration often causes abrupt family structural changes and financial instability. John is aware that his absence may leave his daughter with less than she needs, both emotionally and financially.

“I can’t be there to provide for her or even take her to school,” John said. “I want to play an active role in my daughter’s life, and PIO has given me the tools to do that when I return home.”

Sarah Schlough, director of mental health at the Dane County jail, says that the program focuses on helping inmates become better parents, and doesn’t delve into why they are in jail.

“We purposely don’t ask about things like that because first of all it’s not our business and second, we don’t want them to think that clouds our judgment of them as parents.”

**John says at first** PIO was a way to escape his pod and interact with other parents who were dealing with similar family struggles. However, after a few classes he began learning about effective parenting styles and what he needed to change to be a good father.



John says he learned the value of patience, especially in the discipline of a child. He now understands the importance of not yelling or using violent language around a child. He learned how to listen actively and react thoughtfully. “We don’t remember being their age,” John says. “They take more time to hear what we’re saying and we have to be conscious of that.”

While other parents in the program could use the skills they were learning in real time during family visits, John did not have that privilege. But role-playing with other participants helped him. They practiced typical scenarios parents face, including teaching a child to make spaghetti over the phone and disciplining a child who did not want to come inside for dinner.

Dane County Sgt. Chris Reynolds says the program has limitations in a county jail setting. Since many inmates are detained for fewer than 12 weeks, a shorter program would allow more parents to participate.

Dane County jail administrators and their partners are currently reviewing the program and contemplating revisions. Another cohort of PIO is expected to take place at the Dane County jail later this year.

With a successful pilot run, the UW’s Charles hopes PIO can be implemented at other jails and prisons. “The intent is to try to build a continuum of family-focused services across institutions and within the community in order to best meet family needs.”

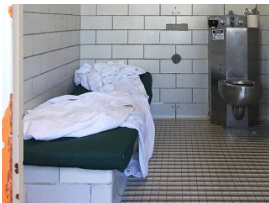
Poehlmann-Tynan says expanding the program could pay off for years to come. “When we help incarcerated parents we know there is reduced risk of recidivism, which not only helps children and families, but helps society.”

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