

BOOKS BEHIND BARS



CONNECTING INMATES AND THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH READING

by Suzanne Loring, Children's Literacy Foundation

Photograph: iStockphoto

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey, "Literacy Behind Bars," estimates that 70 percent of inmates in the United States are functionally illiterate. That means their ability to read and write is inadequate to complete daily living and employment tasks beyond a basic skill level. Of the more than 1.5 million state and federal inmates, 809,800 of them are parents, and that puts more than a million children at high risk of becoming less than proficient readers themselves.

The Children's Literacy Foundation, also known as CLiF, works with incarcerated parents and their children in all 17 prisons across New Hampshire and Vermont. CLiF's mission is to inspire a love of reading and writing among rural, low-income, and at-risk children.

Vermont, New Hampshire

CLiF supports a variety of literacy programs in the prisons and jails across the two states. The organization donates new children's li-

braries for family visiting rooms in prisons and jails, gives books to children of prison inmates, and pays for professional authors and storytellers to perform on family visiting days. In addition, CLiF provides literacy seminars for inmates to encourage them and help them read to their children.

"Parents have a critical influence on their children's interest in becoming strong readers and writers," says Executive Director Duncan McDougall, who is also the organization's principal spokesperson and presenter. "CLiF works to bring families together through fun literacy events and supports them in making reading a regular part of their lives. This is especially challenging for inmates who, because of their situation, are rarely able to share books with their children."

When children listen to books being read aloud and when they read stories themselves, they build listening skills, vocabulary, imagination, and a longer attention span: all attributes that help them become more successful in school.² And reading aloud with

children not only helps build strong literacy skills but also can create a wonderful relationship between child and parent, whether that parent is living at home or not.

For many inmates who aren't confident readers—or who can't read at all—the idea of reading with their children can be quite daunting. CLiF works with inmates who have children at home to help quell these fears and answer questions like, "Why should I read to my child?" "When should I read to my child?" or "How can I read aloud to my child even if I'm not a strong reader?"

McDougall has some tried-and-true tips that he shares during seminars with inmates who are parents:

- It is never too early or too late to start reading with your child.
- Don't worry if you are not a strong reader. Use your own words. Tell the story from the pictures or have your child tell the story.
- Slow down. Take your time reading

and let your child picture the story in his imagination.

- Change your voice. Use plenty of expression when reading. Growl like a lion or yawn when a character is sleepy.
- Have fun! Above all, relax and enjoy. The more fun your child has reading books, the more time she will want to spend reading them.

So Many Hurdles!

According to a 2009 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Early Warning: Why Reading in the Third Grade Matters,” 68 percent of fourth graders in the United States read below a proficient level. A child’s fourth grade literacy level is a key indicator of future academic and career success.³ In fact, one in six children who are not reading proficiently in the third grade do not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers. These rates are highest in children from low-income families and those living in rural areas.

One of the most vulnerable groups of children referred to in the Annie E. Casey Foundation study is children of prison inmates. These young people are already struggling with the stigma of having a parent behind bars. In addition, they are usually from low-income households and from families with lower education levels. As much as 85 percent of children who become juvenile offenders are functionally illiterate, adds the U.S. Department of Education in its 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.

Low literacy skills can have a devastating effect on the future lives of children and on the economy of the nation and its global competitiveness. The United States performs poorly against trading partners and competitors in comparisons of reading achievement. According to one study, if U.S. students had met the educational achievement levels of higher-performing nations between 1983 and 1998, America’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2008 could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher.⁴

Although there are many factors that play into a child’s ability to read—including economic background, parents’ education, developmental disabilities, absences from school, and lack of health insurance—the importance of access to books and of hearing books read to aloud is undeniable.⁵

CLiF helps build these foundations and encourage healthy relationships in inmates and their children by providing both

with books. At the end of each literacy seminar, CLiF introduces the Storybook Program, which allows inmates to choose the books, record themselves reading to their children, and then send both the books and the recording home.

Through listening to the recording and reading the book at home, the child can keep the engagement with the parent going. The next time the parent and child are together, they have the opportunity to talk about and share the experience of reading. In this way, literacy can be introduced into the inmate’s home and a relationship between parent and child can be strengthened around a positive experience with books.

A Better Life

“The Storybook Program generates enthusiasm with every group that participates,” says Anne Aubertin, the former program coordinator at the Hillsborough County Department of Corrections in Manchester, New Hampshire. Thanks to the initiative, she adds, “A group of children will experience the joy of hearing their mother read a great children’s book to them.”

“We have one little boy who comes to visit every week and runs to choose a book to take home.”

CLiF sustains the positive reading experience by ensuring that these children have access to reading materials during future visits. Books are given to them at story times on family visiting day, and CLiF makes sure prisons have books to give to children every time they come to visit.

“We have one little boy who comes to visit every week and runs to choose a book to take home,” said Jess Keller, the program coordinator at the Northwest Correctional Facility in Swanton, Vermont. “We also have one mother who wanted to be able to read her child a book every night when they talked on the phone. We have now made it possible to have children’s books circulate in the woman’s prison for this purpose.”

CLiF hopes to break the cycle of illiteracy among inmates and their children in New Hampshire and Vermont through their partnerships with all the prisons and jails in the two states. Although scientific data are not available, the organization gets

regular feedback that after the seminars, inmates read more with their children and share books with them. Some inmates report that when they have phone calls with their families, the first things the kids want to talk about are the books that the inmates sent home.

Although it was a challenge at first for CLiF to get into the prisons, once a relationship was created, the prison staff were very supportive. The key is to have someone at the prison who makes sure that the children’s library in the visiting room is made available during family visits and who enables prisoners to make recordings of themselves reading books to send home.

CLiF’s model is one that can be easily spread to other prisons. In the past year alone, prisons in New York, Colorado, Wisconsin, and Florida have asked for more information about CLiF’s prison reading program.

Providing books, seminars, presentations, and reading encouragement can translate into fewer children and parents whose struggles with reading and writing separate them from family members and from the world around them.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Laura Blaze, *Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010).
- ² Elisabeth Duursma, Marilyn Augustyn, and Barry Zuckerman, “Reading Aloud to Children: The Evidence,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (May 2008), <http://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2008/05/13/adc.2006.106336.short>.
- ³ “Double Jeopardy: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation” (white paper, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, 2011).
- ⁴ “Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters” (white paper, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, 2009).
- ⁵ “Access to Print Materials Improves Children’s Reading, A Meta-Analysis of 108 Most Relevant Studies Shows Positive Impacts” (white paper, Reading is Fundamental and Learning Point Associates, Washington, DC, 2010).

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