



### **Family whose father is incarcerated : knowledge and development of a program**

\*\*Barrette, M., \*Brunelle, N, \*Lafortune, D., \*Baillargeon, P., \*Dubeau, D., \*Bellemare, D., \*Cusson, \*J-F. and Plant, A.

The project «Grandir sainement avec un père détenu» (growing-up healthily with an incarcerated father) was introduced more than a year ago. This initiative of Maison Radisson aims at preventing the adaptation problems of incarcerated parents's children (part I) and improving the parental competences of these incarcerated fathers (part II). Three phases are planned for each part : the portrait of the father and child; the introduction of intervention and prevention programs; and the transfer of knowledge. This article presents a synthesis of the report/ratio (Bar et al., 2002) written for phase I of the project on the state of knowledge and the development of an intervention and prevention program.

#### **The role of the father in the family:**

The role of the father in the family underwent important transformations during the past years. The rise of the women in the labour market and the increase in the divorce and separation rates actually encouraged several fathers to be implied actively in their children's life. Today's father, in addition to being the provider in the family, protects the mother-child attachment link (\*Marvin and \*Stewart, 1990), represents another figure of attachment which is complementary to the mother's (Hand and \*Weston, 1981) and sufficiently separates the child from his mother, thus supporting his development (\*Biller, 1984). He also makes it possible for the child to socialize himself through games (Lamb, 1976), to explore his environment (\*Camus, 1997) as well as to consolidate his sexual identity (\*Stevenson and \*Black, 1988), his self-esteem and his learning abilities (\*Biller, 1984).

The lack of paternal relationship can have serious effects on the children. Those confronted with the absence of the father or a poor father-child relationship can not only feel sadness, anger, guilt or a fear of abandonment (\*Valois, 1998), but also develop academic difficulties and important adaptation and behavior problems (\*Biller, 1984; Headlights, 1999).



**Impact of imprisonment on the existing family, and programs:**

Imprisonment constitutes a separation which generates complex marital statuses (economic instability, one-parent family, blame and shame) is likely to affect and deteriorate the concerned children and their mothers's life (\*Quéau and Al, 2000). Indeed, having parents involved with criminal and judicial issues are regarded as factors causing important psychological and behavioral problems (confinement into oneself, school absenteeism, lack of discipline, delinquency) in the children whose parents are imprisoned (\*Gabel, 1995; \*Quéau and Al, 2000).

For fathers wishing to maintain a relationship with their children, separation creates the feelings of loss, helplessness, sadness and guilt towards the children. The deterioration of the father-child relationship can also affect the adaptation of the prisoner inside the correctional system and reduce his chances of rehabilitation in the community (\*Lanier, 1995). On the other hand, support to the family relationship can be considered as an important factor in the success of the rehabilitation (\*Wilczack and \*Markstrom, 1999).

In the United States, an important place was given to this reality and so several programs were set up for the incarcerated parents and their children (see \*Cannings, 1990). These programs mainly aim at improving the prisoners conception of the parental role and the development of the child (knowledge), the relation between the parent and the child (role) as well as parental competences of the father (know-how). The privileged activities in these programs are parental education, mutual aid groups, children visits, transport and lodging services, preparation to active life, the support during the release as well as extension services to the community.

Several studies show the positive impact of these programs on the prisoner and the family. The study of \*Wilczack and \*Markstrom (1999) indicates, amongst other things, that the incarcerated fathers having taken part in such a program had increased their knowledge regarding their parental role, thus the development of the children was improved. Other studies also mention that these programs support the rehabilitation of the imprisoned fathers in their family as well as in the community and reduce risk that the prisoner may be guilty of subsequent offenses (\*Carlson and \*Cervera, 1991).



However, in Quebec, there are very few programs, projects or activities which aim at supporting the relationship of incarcerated fathers with their children. Indeed, the current correctional policies seem to take little account of the fact that the prisoner might have children. In addition, the majority of the listed services are found only through the prison services. Considering that the father-child relationship will be truly established in the community, and for a continuity of services, it appeared relevant to adapt and create an intervention and prevention program which takes into account the more specific context of the release.

### **Portrait of Quebec families whose father is imprisoned:**

Above all, the development of programs requires to determine the needs expressed by the concerned persons. This is why it proved to be necessary, within the framework of this project, to analyze the situations of a Quebec family having an incarcerated father, by considering the point of view of the fathers, their spouse and child as well as responsables of the transitional housing working with these families.

The analysis of the interviews with the fathers (\*n=19), the mothers (\*n=6), and children (\*n=2) and the responsables (\*n=9)<sup>1</sup> shows that three great periods will affect the life of the incarcerated fathers's families: the arrestation, the incarceration and the release. Indeed, the arrestation and legal procedures are considered difficult moments by every member of the family. The procedures surrounding the arrestation and the judgment will often involve sorrow, anger, disappointment, shame and guilt among members of the family. They produce an unsteadiness within the family to which various difficulties are added: mediatization, lack of information, the length of the legal procedures and financial problems.

According to the persons interviewed, the separation caused by the incarceration disturbs the family's organization and creates personal consequences (fear of separation or final separation, depression, feeling of helplessness, guilt, loneliness, and sadness), economic consequences (lower family income, difficulties of assuming the expenses of housing, food or others) and social consequences (blame and shame) which is important among the members

---

<sup>1</sup> Note that a « focus groups » had been formed with seven of the responsables, and the other two were interviewed later

of the family. Behavioral (confinement, aggressiveness or delinquency) and academic problems are also observed in the children. Some of them also mention to have adopted a role of emotional support for their mother ever since their father was incarcerated.

In spite of incarceration, several fathers wish to maintain a relationship with their family and their children. However, dynamic difficulties (the relationship with the mother) and static difficulties (the not very flexible visiting hours, inadequate rooms for visits, costs of the phone calls and transportation) can influence, and even break, the family relationship during the imprisonment.

The release also constitutes an adaptation period for the incarcerated fathers' families. This adaptation is lived by some mothers as a reorganization of their life which they had established during the incarceration of the father and by doubting the marital relationship (fear of losing lately acquired autonomy, conflicts resulting from the children's up-bringing). For the fathers, the release is rather punctuated by the importance to re-create relationship with their family and their children as well as an awakening to their way of life. The children once again live with a feeling of insecurity associated with the fear of being separated from their father.

In spite of the difficulties and the family changes met during the arrestation, incarceration and the release of the father, few services or programs are offered to the prisoners' families. In order to be given help, the different members of the family had to resort to the support of their close relatives or the services offered in the community. Thus, many of them suggest that services or information and support programs for the family (social and financial resources) should be given to the prisoners' families. According to the transitional housing responsables who were consulted, it would be important to make this help available for the changes period : at the moment of incarceration and release of the father. It proves to be essential that these services be continuous and offered to all the members of the family.

#### **Intervention and prevention programs:**

The scientific writings as well as the remarks received from the prisoners' families and the responsables show the lack of support, in prisons and transitional housing, for the parental role. The Maison Radisson, anxious to integrate parental dimension into the activities of its



organization, took the initiative to develop a program for the incarcerated fathers and their children. The purpose of the intervention program «Grandir sainement avec un père détenu» (growing-up healthily with an incarcerated father) treats more specifically of the release period and thus maintain and reinforce the relationship between the incarcerated fathers and their children. The program focuses on the two important parts of the intervention: the children (part I) and the fathers (part II).

The purpose of the program intended for the children (part I) is to prevent the adaptation problems in the children whose father is imprisoned. This part is actually a support and prevention program. It consists in leading the children to understand/accept the conditions surrounding imprisonment and the release of the father as well as their impacts, and supporting the expression of feelings (anger, fear, guilt or others) and socialization. It also aims at creating a partnership with the resources of the community in order to meet the specific needs of these children.

The intervention program built for the fathers (part II) aims at improving parental competences of the incarcerated fathers. More specifically, the objectives of the program are to increase the knowledge (knowledge related to the parental role and the development of the child), know-how (development, maintenance or improvement of parental competences) and role of the incarcerated fathers (developing the skills associated with a greater comfort with the individual and creating harmonious interpersonal relationships).

This program is aimed at incarcerated fathers in transitional housing and their children whom wish to maintain a relationship. However, the program excludes those having been convicted of Sexual Offences (incest, pedophilia) or having a prohibition against contact with children.

It is more specifically by the introduction of sports, cultural and educational activities, and other such activities that the program aims at maintaining the relationship between the incarcerated fathers and their children. These activities, in addition to supporting the father-child reconciliation, generally allow: 1. to establish a trusting relation between the fathers and their children, 2. to encourage progressive reconciliation with the father in the life of his children, 3. to share pleasant moments with the children and members of his family, 4. to

practice parental responsibilities in a supervised environment and 5. to reinforce the father's experience by individual or group interventions (see \*Cannings, 1990).

Within the framework of this program, workshops are also offered to the incarcerated fathers to increase their knowledge on 1. the role, the function and the engagement of the father in the life of the child, 2. the development of the child and his needs, 3. the impact of separation and incarceration and 4. the children's adaptation problems and the means of intervention.

It will now be a question of establishing this program in some transitional housing and, in a year from now, have a written report of how it all progressed.

\*\*Martine Barrette, co-ordinating «**Grandir sainement avec un père détenu**» (**growing-up healthily with an incarcerated father**) is a criminologist. Natacha \*Brunelle, Andre Plante and Pierre \*Baillargeon are professor-researchers at the department of \*psychoeducation at the University of Quebec in Trois-Rivières. Denis \*Lafortune is a professor-researcher at the School of criminology of the University of Montreal. Diane \*Dubeau is an external evaluator for the project and a professor-researcher at the department of psychoeducation at the University of Quebec in Hull. Daniel \*Bellemare is a general manager at Maison Radisson, a Community residential center located in Trois-Rivières. Jean-François \*Cusson is an active member of the Association of the services of social rehabilitation of Quebec (ASRSQ).

## References :

- Barrette, M., Lafortune, D., Baillargeon, P., Brunelle, N. et Plante, A. (2002). Rapport de la phase I du projet «Grandir sainement avec un père détenu». Rapport réalisé par la Maison Radisson.
- Billar, H.B. (1984). Fathers and Families : Patterns Factors in Child Development. Westport, Connecticut, London; Auburn House.
- Carlson, B. E. & Cervera, N. (1991). Inmates and their Families: Conjugal Visits, Family Contact, and Family Functioning. Criminal Justice and Behavior: An International Journal, 18, 1, 318-331.
- Cannings, K.L. (1990). Un vide à combler: programmes et services visant à faciliter les contacts entre les détenus et leurs enfants. Gouvernement du Canada, Direction des affaires correctionnelles.
- Gabel, S. (1995). Les problèmes de comportement des enfants dont les parents sont incarcérés. Forum, 7, 2, 37-39.
- Lanier, C.S. (1995). Les pères incarcérés: programme de recherche. Forum, 7, 2, 34-36.
- Le Camus, J. (1995). Pères & bébé. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Le Quéau, P., Ailet, V., Dubéchet, P., Fronteau, A., & Olm, C. (2000). L'autre peine, enquête exploratoire sur les conditions de vie des familles de détenus. Département « évaluation des Politiques Sociales, Crédoc, l'entreprise de recherche. Cahier de recherche, No. 147 P.139.
- Main, M. & Weston, D. R. (1981). The quality of the toddler's relationshipship to mother and to father: Related to conflict behavior and the readiness to establish new relationshipships. Child Development, 52, 3, 932-940.
- Markstrom C. A. & Wilczak, G. L. (1999). The effects of parent education on parental locus of control and satisfaction of incarcerated fathers. International Journal of offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 43, 1, 90-102.
- Marvin, R. S., Stewart, R. B. (1990). A family systems framework for the study of attachment. In Greenberg, M.T., Cicchetti, D. (Eds). Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research, and intervention (pp. 51-86). Chicago, IL, US: The University of Chicago Press.
- Phares, V. (1999). « Poppa » Psychology. The role of fathers in children's men being. Westport : Praeger.
- Stevenson, M.R. & Black, K.N. (1988). Paternal absence and sex-role development: A meta-analysis. Child Development, 59, 3, 793-814.
- Valois, J. (1998). Sociologie de la famille au Québec. Montréal: Édition CEC Inc.
- Wilczark, G.L. & Markstrom, C.A. (1999). The effects of parent education on parental locus of control and satisfaction of incarcerated fathers. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 43, 1, 90-102.