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Doing time to be better dad

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Ideally, a prison sentence is not only punishment for a crime, it is a chance for rehabilitation toward a new life. The Maryland-based National Fatherhood Initiative is hoping that if men are taught to be better fathers, they can start that new life with a plan.

NFI's innovative InsideOut Dad program is a 12-session course facilitated for inmates by social workers and other mental health professionals. "It gets men to examine who they are as people and how that can impact relationships with the women and children in their lives," says NFI President Roland Warren.

"It is about reflection, correction and connection," says Mr. Warren, a columnist for The Washington Times. "This is a program that addresses re-entry. It is helping guys to prepare for life on the outside."

InsideOut Dad, which has been in operation for three years, is being used in 43 states, Mr. Warren says. Prison systems can purchase the curriculum from NFI for less than \$500. National statistics show it is a program that is needed.

About 1.5 million American children have a parent, most often a father, who is in prison. A majority of the nation's 2 million inmates grew up in fatherless homes. About 600,000 inmates are released from prison annually. In less than three years, two-thirds are arrested again.

"It is important to give these men the ability to work through major issues," Mr. Warren says. "A lot of them grew up without dads and don't have a sense of what good fathering is. One way to reduce recidivism is to connect to community and family."

Some of the topics included in the sessions: "what is a man," spirituality and family, expressing emotions, the impact of drugs and alcohol on emotions, differences between men and women, stress and anger, self-worth, and improving communication skills. Later sessions tackle the role of the father, child development, connecting with your children and creating a re-entry plan.

In an early session, the men are prompted to remember their past and their own relationships with their fathers and mothers. They discuss past abuse and the impact it has had on them as adults and in their relationships with their children.

Inmates are given a writing prompt to construct their life stories with entries such as "My favorite memories of school are ...," "Some things that bring back bad memories ...," "The first time I got in trouble with the law was ..." and "Today, the major supports in my life are ..." They are asked to remember what they observed by watching their own parents: Did they see a loving relationship or fathers who were controlling and forceful?

The more a man knows about his qualities, both positive and negative, and his traits, both good and bad, the more control he has over his behavior, the teaching materials explain.

"Mention to the dads that good relationships are based on good choices, not chance," the manual says. "They are capable of learning from their mistakes and recognizing and avoiding the problems others encounter."

Another session discusses discipline and how the goal of discipline is to guide and teach, not criticize and demean.

"One of the real challenges for inmates is you don't want your kids to make the same mistakes," Mr. Warren says.

On paper, some of the topics may seem to be a bit touchy-feely for a prison population. However, Delgracia Hendricks, acting director of social work for the Maryland Department of Corrections, says there usually is a waiting list at the four Maryland facilities where the voluntary program is in place. (Jails in the District use the program, and Virginia jails use a similar program.)

"Our pre- and post-tests show they tend to enjoy it and learn from it," she says. "It is the first time they have had to discuss relationships."

Ms. Hendricks says the Maryland Department of Corrections has not done follow-up surveys to determine the program's impact. However, aftercare programs, run in conjunction with community-based organizations such as churches, are in place so men can continue to work on relationship issues.