

## Strengthening Families in Special Environments

by Wayna Buch

With the increase of drug use, more young children in our programs are coping with parental incarceration. Teachers say they see an increase of challenging behaviors and low motivation towards learning due to parental loss. Young children grieving their losses struggle in social groups, often acting out their anger and frustration upon peers or caregivers. Their sense of well being is shattered, as is their sense of self worth. If both parents face incarceration, the loss increases. Often children must live with aging grandparents, relatives, or foster families.

The statistics are compelling: **60 percent of children with imprisoned parents are younger than eight.** Children of prisoners are six times more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lives. There is growing recognition, locally and nationally, of the need to foster positive and more frequent communication between incarcerated parents and their children to strengthen families and break the cycle of incarceration.

The Urban Institute in Washington, DC reported that children, feeling the void of an imprisoned parent or family member, often succumb to developmental problems (2003). By age 2, children who have been left behind as infants become completely dependent on substitute caregivers and rarely ever bond with their parent. By age 6, that child may become more independent, but display socio-emotional



Wayna is an Early Childhood Trainer and Community Program Manager with Good Beginnings Alliance in Hawaii. Wayna developed and coordinates an innovative program called, Supporting Keiki (Children) of Incarcerated Parents-SKIP held at Waiawa Correctional Facility. SKIP is a collaborative partnership early childhood program that strengthens families and supports children coping with parental incarceration. Wayna also facilitates training classes using a curriculum she helped to develop called, Supporting Parents as First Teachers (SPAFT). Wayna's passion for working with young children came from being orphaned at an early age, living in nine foster homes in nine years, and later becoming a foster parent. She has extensive experiences in working with children and families at risk, those with special needs, and families impacted by substance abuse and/or incarceration.

impairment, traumatic stress reactions, and "survivor guilt." Between ages 7 and 10, a child shows less ability to overcome future emotional trauma.

### Addressing an unmet need

Good Beginnings Alliance (GBA) is the intermediary organization dedicated to ensuring that in Hawaii there are programs in place to provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and capacity to provide their young children with safe and nurturing environments. In response to a need for the children of incarcerated parents, GBA developed a partnership with Waiawa Correctional Facility and two local organizations — The Coalition for Dads and The Institute For Family Enrichment (TIFFE, Nurturing Fathers Program). The partnership resulted in the creation of the SKIP (Supporting Keiki of Incarcerated Parents) Project.

Supporting Keiki of Incarcerated Parents (SKIP) Project is a community-based family strengthening project aimed at secondary prevention of child abuse and neglect among children of incarcerated parents. SKIP is designed to increase incarcerated and custodial parents' ability to provide safe and nurturing environments for their young children while incarcerated. The SKIP model works with incarcerated fathers at Waiawa Correctional Facility, due to be released and reunited with their children within 6 months to one year, and their families.

SKIP goals are to reconnect parent and child prior to release and to strengthen family bonds. The interactive, hands-on learning and guidance of parenting skills allows the parent and children to learn and play together in a safe, facilitated, and structured learning environment, also known as a playgroup.

*Note: Incarceration of a parent affects all children regardless of age. However, for the sake of this article, the focus is on young children coping with the impact of parental incarceration.*

## Early childhood program in a special environment

Playgroups, or parent participation programs, as some call them, take place throughout the state of Hawaii. These programs take place in communities and are seen as an informal continuum of care for families unable to access preschool. There are many different models of playgroups; some, like SKIP, occur in special environments or are specific to an identified need, such as the playgroup for children with special needs. All programs have common outcomes and components:

- parent-child interactive activities
- literacy and language development
- information, resources, and family supports
- culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate curriculum and environment
- parent education and leadership training

In spring 2003, the SKIP Project initiated a 13-week pilot project, the first of its kind in Hawaii. The concept of children going into prison presented some challenges and opposition, but also more support than anticipated. Seizing the opportunity to provide needed services to a gap group, we forged ahead by conducting a playgroup at the Waiawa Correctional Facility for inmate fathers simultaneously enrolled in a therapeutic curriculum called Nurturing Fathers. For most of the inmates, the Good Beginnings Playgroup was the first opportunity they had in years to spend quality time with their children on a regular basis. While the Nurturing Fathers classes allow fathers the chance to reflect and learn about their childhood parental role models, the playgroup offers them the opportunity to practice parenting skills, with a coach.

### Fathers in training

Fathers who apply go through an application and interview process. Once accepted they receive hands-on early childhood training using the Good Beginnings Alliance curriculum "Supporting Parents as First Teachers" (SPAFT), for five weeks prior to the start of the playgroup. SPAFT prepares them for caregiving responsibilities. During their SPAFT classes, fathers learn the importance of the early years and their role as First Teachers to children. For some, this concept is very new and terrifying. The adult learner curriculum teaches fathers about child development, setting up the environment, appropriate ways to communicate with children and, how children play and learn. Fathers all learn and

practice how to change diapers, set a snack table, do finger plays, sing songs, and guide children through routines and transitions. By the end of the five weeks, fathers are able to transform an adult education classroom into a safe learning environment in preparation for the children to arrive at playgroup.

### SKIP play and learn mornings

Before morning activities begin, the fathers gather for "Talk Story" to check in, discuss the day's parent-child activity, and get guidance tips. Once the children arrive at the door, fathers are on! Under the guidance of a trained early childhood teacher and assistant, fathers practice skills and knowledge learned in their classes. In this safe, supportive environment, they learn to accept and become comfortable with their role and responsibilities as "Dad." It is important to note that SKIP is not a "visit" — it is a time to work through newly learned skills and knowledge. The primary focus is on parental guidance and re-bonding of the parent and child relationship.

The value of the program is stated by Warden Ted Sakai who says, "This program has changed the way the men do time. It has made a positive difference on how the whole prison does business."

Further evidence of this fact comes from the fathers. One father shared how he was never a dad to his children and now hoped to have a "second chance." Three weeks later he sat comfortably on a cushion in the library area reading the *Kissing Hand* to his three children, ages 6, 8, and 10. As he read he kissed each child's hand. His son giggled in delight pointed to him, then said, "I love you, Daddy."

Later, during closing "Talk Story," this dad shared how he felt "blessed" because he was given a gift he thought was lost forever — the love of his children who thought of him as "uncle."

### Testimonial evidence that it works!

Media has filmed and written much about SKIP over the years. A six-year-old child, who wanted to be interviewed, shared with a reporter how much the SKIP playgroup meant to her. She shared, "I get to be with my daddy and do things with him. I get to see him and know he is fine."

Another father shared that he and his daughter had "no relationship." He said he saw her five times in five years. By her third playgroup he watched her as she sat playing intently

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with sand and water toys. Dad seemed mesmerized by her playfulness. She turned to him and said, "Daddy, I am making you and me a castle to live in and play in by the beach. It is a sand castle." She reached for his hand and invited him to sit with her as she completed the structure. Tears welled up in dad's eyes. Later at "Talk Story" he shared, "She called me daddy and wanted me near her. I can never return to this place; my daughter needs me, she needs her Dad!"

When parents get that they are important to their children, they begin to make attitude and life changes. Whether or not they return home, they seem to understand for the first time, that THEY are essential to the well-being of their child, and being in prison is very hard for children. A father told a reporter, "I get it now! When I do time, my whole family does time, right along with me."

## Nurturing the caregiver

SKIP also nurtures the caregiver, parent, grandparent, or foster parent who brings the children to the facility. They do not enter the playgroup room; instead, they meet in an adjoining room with a trained facilitator. After check-in they discuss common issues, learn about child development, get information on resources, or just enjoy down time. A caregiver shared, "It is the only time in a week that I have to myself. It gives me time to just be with adults and take care of me."

Another mom shared how she works at night, sleeps during the day for a couple of hours, then "takes care of life," until it is time for her to pick up her children. After tending to their needs, she kisses them good night, then studies until it is time to leave for work. Her parents care for the children at night. The playgroup is so important that she makes the extra effort

to be there each week. She says, "It is my time to breathe and regroup."

## Beyond the walls

The SKIP project has been such a success that Good Beginnings is receiving requests from other correctional facilities and social service agencies to be trained in providing SKIP services. SKIP could not happen without partners committed to strengthening families and to decreasing the cycle of child abuse and neglect. Each partner brings to the program resources and funds to support families with little or no help raising children who are struggling with parental incarceration. Partners also help identify needed teacher and community training to increase awareness of parental incarceration.

Most remarkably, some parents exiting prison have joined us in our efforts to expand services to families and children by advocating for more such programs in male, female, and youth facilities. They share their stories, help with evaluating and reviewing the program, and offer advice to guide our work. They have become natural partners.

## Challenges and barriers

SKIP is not without its share of challenges and barriers. However, because of the committed partners, funders, and the correctional facility, we work to negotiate and address each challenge head on. As Warden Sakai stated, "In the end, it really is about all of us doing what is best for our kids!"

## References

The Urban Institute. (November, 2003). "Families Left Behind: The Hidden Costs of Incarceration and Re-entry" Report.

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Lessons learned:** Validating families as first educators of their children is important work. Explore ways to support parents in your program as first teachers of their children using this article as a springboard.

**Me, too!** Do families enrolled in your program need support in interacting successfully with their children? Consider implementing a SKIP-like program with families. Use this article as a starting place, then make the ultimate program your own.

**Leveraging the model:** Explore connecting with a local correctional institution to replicate this interesting model.