

Offenders learning to be better parents

Since 1988, the Correctional Service of Canada has been working to implement a series of cognitively based personal development programs in its institutions and community facilities. The Parenting Skills Training Program was designed to deal with the stress that incarceration places on family relationships.

The 16-session (32 hours) program is aimed at male offenders who want to deal more effectively with family members generally and, in particular, with children. It attempts to help offenders develop and improve the skills needed to relate successfully with their families. The program is based on the cognitive development model and therefore strives to improve offenders' cognitive functioning while, at the same time, teaching parenting skills.

This article briefly describes the program's goals, focus and components, and provides a limited assessment of its effectiveness thus far. It is important to note from the outset, however, that the program is not based on any "typical" family structure. It accommodates a wide range of family structures such as single-parent homes and step families. This is vital given the changing nature of many offenders' families. Approach The Parenting Skills Training Program was implemented in 1991 as part of a federal family violence initiative and is one of six programs that make up the "living skills" programming series. To date, a total of 60 program delivery officers have been trained to deliver the program across all regions of the Correctional Service of Canada.

The program is structured to deal with eight common offender cognitive problems⁽²⁾ that hurt their ability to relate well with their families:

- impulsiveness;
- putting the blame for their actions on other people and believing that their life is beyond their control;
- lack of concrete reasoning;
- rigidity and intolerance;
- shortage of interpersonal problem-solving skills;
- egocentricity;
- underdeveloped values; and
- critical reasoning problems.

These shortcomings contribute to the emergence of a number of key parenting problems such as poor communication, inconsistent, inappropriate or ineffective discipline, and the failure to apply problem-solving skills in family interaction or teach such skills to children. They can also lead to an inability to recognize and teach that actions have consequences, and inadequate role modelling of prosocial behaviour and values.

This program is designed to deal with these key problems - both directly and through the constant "recycling" of useful concepts throughout the course in the form of examples and assignments.

In general, the program stresses three main areas: understanding a parent's job within the family, the responsibility that comes with being a parent and the consequences of parental action or inaction. Target audience The Parenting Skills Training Program targets male offenders who have family problems related to poor parenting skills. The problems range from inadequate knowledge of child development to the inability to communicate effectively with children to the use of inappropriate discipline methods.

This type of program is vital. Offenders with inadequate child development information and poor parenting skills (who are, or will be, in a parent or guardian role) potentially place their children at risk. For example, they may use harsh or inappropriate parenting methods that result in the neglect of a child's basic needs, or in emotional or physical abuse. The program attempts to prevent these behaviours by providing offenders with basic parental knowledge and skills.

However, this program is not psychotherapy and is not designed to deal directly with offenders' emotional problems. The program is also not designed for offenders sentenced for child abuse or incest (unless they have already received extensive counselling and therapy), for offenders with extremely volatile family relationships (they should be deferred from the program until their situation stabilizes) or for female offenders.⁽³⁾ Finally, it is not a treatment program for offenders with family violence problems. Structure The program is divided into four major sections⁽⁴⁾: the family, interpersonal skills, caring for your family and developing skills. Each theme is covered during four two-hour training sessions. Within these sessions, offenders are provided with a knowledge base and are taught basic skills for addressing problems related to the theme.

For example, the family sessions provide basic information about a child's food, shelter and safety needs, examine a child's emotional, physical and cognitive development, and look at the roles of empathy, rigidity and caring in a family environment.

The program uses a variety of techniques such as group activities, role-playing, improvisation, thinking games, moral dilemma and problem "solving," and case study examination. All are introduced in the context of learning how to parent, but the objective is to enhance the offenders' creativity and sharpen their generally weak empathic abilities. Is it working? A research component within the Parenting Skills Training Program allows for the assessment of pre- to post-programming changes in the knowledge and attitudes of offenders who complete the program.⁽⁵⁾ A battery of measures assess changes in specific target areas. While simple pre- to post-programming changes are not direct measures of improved parenting, they are an index of program performance and may be linked to the program's effectiveness in addressing key areas that affect offenders' parenting styles and behaviour.

The results of the most recent program analysis are generally encouraging.⁽⁶⁾ Although the ultimate effects of the program will not be seen for some time, preliminary results (based on a sample of 68 offenders) indicate that learning did occur and that participants are now more aware of family and child-care issues.

In short, offenders who participated in the program appear to have learned something about, and to have modified their attitudes toward, parenting. Hopefully, this will have a positive impact on their parenting style and on their relationships with their children.

The Parenting Skills Training Program is one element in a strategy to better equip offenders to deal more constructively with their family relationships. Caring, consistent and disciplined parenting, and exposure to positive role models are key elements in the prevention of future delinquency. Hopefully, this program can help break the criminal cycle that might otherwise pass from parent to child.

(1) Correctional Research and Development, Correctional Service of Canada, 2nd Floor, 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

(2) R.R. Ross and E. Fabiano, *Time To Think: A Cognitive Model of Delinquency Prevention and Offender Rehabilitation* (Johnson City, Tennessee: Institute of Social Sciences and Arts Inc., 1985).

(3) The Correctional Service of Canada is currently developing guidelines for parenting programs for female offenders, to be implemented in the new Federally Sentenced Women's facilities.

(4) *The Parenting Skills Training Program Manual* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).

(5) J.R. Weekes, W. A. Millson and T. Gee, *The Parenting Skills Program: Evaluation of Intermediate Program Measures* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1994).

(6) Weekes, Millson and Gee, *The Parenting Skills Program: Evaluation of Intermediate Program Measures*.