

L.A. County Jails Help Inmates and Their Children

A CHILD ANSWERS THE DOOR, and a police officer enters to take mom or dad away. The child feels that it was his fault, and that police are the enemy. Or perhaps a child is told that a missing parent is “on a long trip.” He moves in with relatives, has to change schools, and then overhears adults discussing jail. He can’t ask questions. He’s not supposed to know.

This is incarceration from the *child’s* perspective. The confusion and anger can leave emotional scars, as well as a distrust or hatred of authority.

Teaching and Loving Kids (TALK) is a program in the Los Angeles County Jails designed to help children from infancy through age 12 deal with these issues, while moms and dads learn parenting and literacy skills.

This is just one program in a system that also offers GED studies, vocational classes, and other educational services for 18,000 to 20,000 inmates, according to Vicky Rossier, director of Adult Education for the Hacienda La Puente Adult & Continuing Education Department. Providing a wide variety of adult services throughout the community, Hacienda La Puente also contracts with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department to provide education services on AIDS, drugs, family relations, parenting skills, domestic violence, and more.

Focusing on the family is one way to help both child and prisoner, says Doris Meyer, Hacienda La Puente’s assistant director for adult education.

Children do better when they know first hand that the incarcerated parent is okay. Many programs “bring in children for the moms, but my focus is the child. Jails are not child friendly.” A child talks to the parent on a telephone through a plexiglass window. Or, in contact visits, the child is sent to a corner with a couple of broken toys while the adults talk. In collaboration with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, “we set up an environment where the child feels secure and can visit in a way that is meaningful for a child.”

“From our perspective, the last time a child saw mom or dad, the parent was being hauled off by a ‘mean’ policeman,” says Karen Dalton, director of Bureau Operations, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. This program provides “an opportunity for a law enforcement officer to be seen as friendly, kind, helpful.”

The visit environment is child centered, with low tables and chairs, and an emphasis on play. There may be glitter, crayons, and cardboard, or a doll corner. Sometimes, mom has made play dough or colored macaroni in her

parenting class. When the child comes, she can say, ‘I made this for us, and we can play with it together.’ There might be a sandbox, a tricycle, or even a pond where parent and child can explore what floats and what doesn’t.

Meyer adds: “Our teachers look for *interactive* items – two-seat tricycles; a ball so the child has to play with the parent; a tea set so the child can serve mom. The child can move to different areas as his/her interest changes, and the parent goes along. The parent is in the *child’s* world for a couple of hours.”

A lot of these parents never *were* children, Meyer says. “Moms need to sit and play with the glitter before the visit; many never did.” In addition, “we read to the inmates. They were never read to, but now they want to read to their child and they actually learn to read using a child’s library. If they express interest, we move them into Adult Basic Education and then GED studies.”

In classes, inmates learn that twice during a visit, “the parent must say, ‘It’s *NOT* your fault that I’m here.’ Five times, the parent must say, ‘I love you.’ And if the child does not say ‘I love you’ back, mom or dad can’t complain. We work very hard on that in classes,” Meyer says.

If a parent has more than one child, he/she must spend at least 10 minutes alone with each one. (Parents who don’t have visitors that week keep an eye on the other children). In class, parents learn that they must go to the oldest child first, not the youngest. Parents are told, “The oldest remembers when you were high or didn’t come home; that’s where you have the most healing to do.” This way, the oldest gets to feel special; when it’s time to leave, the oldest leaves last.

After a visit, parents fill out worksheets in class: What words did the children use today? Do they know their colors? Were there questions you couldn’t answer? Parents write what they learned about the child. They are taught to talk about the visit and support each other. “Mothers often cry after the children leave,” Meyer says.

Parents glean an understanding of developmental stages—what a two-year-old can do and what a six-year-old can do. This helps them establish *realistic* expectations.

To help solidify parenting lessons for male inmates, the wife, girl friend, or mother who brings the child also attends a special class, Rossier says.

“They learn the same things the inmate did,” she notes. “We hope they’ll talk and write, and present a more united front on raising children. When the inmate returns to the family, he can’t just take over. He wants his power back, but that can be very disruptive. He needs to ease back in.”

TALK wouldn’t be possible without the support of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, Meyer says. She cites Karen Dalton and “people like her who support and believe in” the program. “At first, some deputies didn’t warm up to the idea, but now that it has been shown to be successful, there are deputies who have bonded to the program and bring cookies.”

For more information, contact Vicky Rossier or Doris Meyer at Hacienda La Puente Adult & Continuing Education Division, 14101 East Nelson Avenue, La Puente, CAL 91746; or e-mail vrossier@hlpusd.k-12.ca.us. TALK curricula may be obtained for \$50 by contacting Rossier or Meyer.



English-speaking supervisors.

At several elementary schools, Operation Read is planning ESL sessions for stay-at-home moms, timed to end with the school day so mother and child can go home together. ESL services also are available to other members of the city's growing international population, including immigrants from China, Bosnia, Russia, Jordan, Mali, and Japan.

"We believe that the ability to read and write, to understand and be understood, is critical to personal freedom and the maintenance of a democratic society. We recognize literacy as an integral element in the broader goals of economic opportunity and security, social justice, and dignity."

ESL is only one facet of a program that began in 1979 as an outreach of the Lexington Public Library. The mission, Toye says, "is to assist adults in acquiring the reading and writing skills they desire to achieve their personal goals. We serve adults who have never learned to read and write and immigrants who are just learning to read English."

"When adults' basic skills are low, they are more likely to be on public assistance, less likely to be involved in their child's education, and less likely to vote," she says. "We believe that the ability to read and write, to understand and be understood, is critical to personal freedom and the maintenance of a democratic society. We recognize literacy as an integral element in the broader goals of economic opportunity and security, social justice, and dignity."

Other Operation Read services include:

- **Family Literacy:** Parents and children are the audience for interactive learning opportunities
- **GED:** In partnership with the Central Kentucky Technical College, Operation Read offers assessment and preparatory classes
- **Correctional Literacy:** Operation Read trains inmates to tutor other inmates at the Federal Medical Center


- **Computer Assisted Learning:** Learning labs utilize educational software for adult new learners

- **Basic Literacy:** An estimated 15 percent of Lexington citizens can't read above the 6th grade level, and most who come to us can't read at all, Toye says. Operation Read matches learners with volunteer tutors. The pairs meet three hours a week to work on basic reading and writing skills. "We try to get the learners to come to small group sessions also," Toye says, "because they can interact and learn from each other, but some are not ready for a class setting."

In addition, Learner Support Specialist Patsy Golden, herself an Operation Read participant, organizes social activities, as well as group volunteer opportunities to help the learners contribute and build self-esteem.

Operation Read served 1,140 students in the last fiscal year, says Michelle Adomitis, systems & financial analyst. Financing comes through fund-raisers; contributions from the United Way and the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government; grants from Keeneland, LexMark, Starbucks, Toyota, and Wal-Mart; and individual donors. "Every dollar is used fully," says Adomitis. "We get a big bang for our buck. And for every \$3 spent, \$33 comes back to the community."

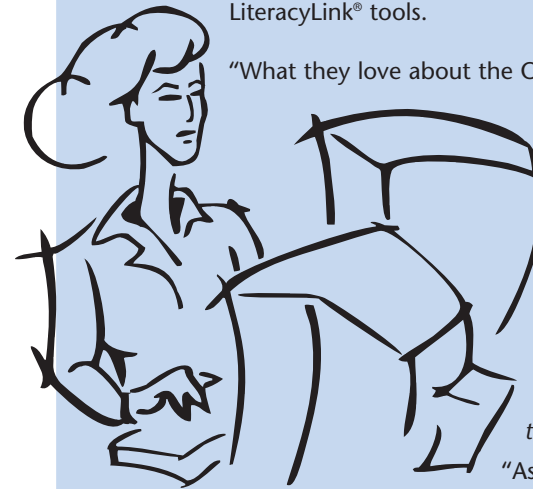
More than 300 volunteers serve the students and "we need more," Toye says. After 14 hours of training, volunteers are certified through ProLiteracy America. Other volunteers, including members of RSVP (the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program) and PACE (Prepare Adults for Community/Competitive Employment), help with child care while parents are in class.

"Our volunteers make this work," Toye says. "Volunteers are our program." 

For more information, contact Operation Read, 251 West Second Street, Lexington, KY 40507; call (859) 254-9964, or visit the Web site at www.opread.org.

OMS Teachers Interact with Learners Online


"Teachers are thrilled with the Online Management System," says Milli Fazey, former director of sales and marketing for KET's Enterprise Division, now a busy trainer helping teachers make the most of PBS LiteracyLink® tools.



"What they love about the OMS is that learners can work online at their own pace, and teachers can see what learners in their virtual classroom have accomplished – online and in real time," says Fazey.

"As soon as a learner clicks the 'save' button, that work goes into an online portfolio. In seconds, the teacher can see the learner's work online on the teacher's computer screen. And teachers can use the messaging feature to interact with their learners online one-on-one. They can comment on their learners' work, offer suggestions, instruction, and encouragement, immediately or at a later time. The OMS also has a reporting function that allows teachers and administrators to run reports showing the amount of work their learners have accomplished over a given period."

LiteracyLink lessons, activities, and pre-tests are available free, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to any learner with access to the Internet. For a moderate fee, the LiteracyLink Online Management System gives teachers the advantage of interacting with learners and keeping track of their progress.

"Learners can work at their own pace, and teachers can review the work online at their convenience – whether they're at a learning center or at home," says Fazey. "It's a big help to busy teachers who want to stay in touch." 

For more information, visit LiteracyLink online at www.pbs.org/literacy, or call KET at (800) 354-9067.