

REMOTE CONTROL PARENTING A PROGRAM FOR PARENT-INMATES

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Introduction

The Remote Control Parenting program is for prison inmates who are also parents and who do not stop being parents upon landing behind bars. They have no choice but to cope with parenting by remote control.

The program's key perception is that an imprisoned parent can still fulfill an important part of his or her family duties and present an authoritative and meaningful role model. The second core premise is that, for any and every person, the sense of belonging to a family and community builds a sense of security and identity. A man or woman's society, the group he belongs to, his relations with this group, these are all fundamentals of Adlerian theory and they provide the program's guiding concepts. The program is designed and run by the Adler Institute, working in close cooperation with the Israel Prison Service (IPS) Education Branch.

The Program

The program took its first steps in 1992 in two prisons. By 2004, 19 facilities had taken it on, with 405 prisoners enrolled in 33 groups. For quite a while now, the program has not needed to 'market itself'— group members bring fellow inmates into the groups.

The Basic Challenges

- The groups are heterogeneous: Jews and Arabs, immigrants and native-born Israelis together. This means that different cultural codes are operative and that there

are even language problems.

- The inmates are not living with their children. Their interaction is mainly via phone calls, letters, family visits and furloughs (for those eligible) once in several weeks. The nature of the interaction and its frequency varies with each prisoner.
- Many inmates are addicted to drugs or alcohol, which has severe consequences for the family, before incarceration and after.
- In some cases the children of the inmates do not even know their father is in prison, which poses extra difficulties.

Goals and Objectives

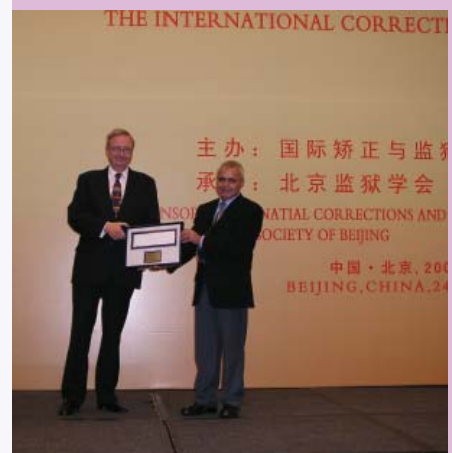
In light of the special needs of parents in prison, the program focuses on four goals:

- To change thinking
Changing attitudes towards educating children while teaching ways of looking at parent-child relationships from different angles. Parental self-awareness. Explaining children's needs and aims.
- To teach coping strategies and develop a sense of parental competence
Showing ways of coping with parenting duties. The aim is to enable inmate-parents to fulfill a parental role in spite of their low self-esteem and feelings of blame and shame.
- To set the inmate-parent a

ICPA AWARDS INTERNATIONAL PRIZE TO ISRAEL PRISON SERVICE – AGAIN

The Israel Prison Service (IPS) is both appreciative and proud to have been the recipient of the International Corrections and Prisons Association's Offender Management and Reintegration Award for the year 2004, after having received a similar award in 2002. This year's winning program "Remote Control Parenting" is a joint venture with the Adler Institute, which shared the award with the IPS. The award was presented at the Annual Conference in Beijing.

"The ICPA Award recognizes outstanding programs which contribute to the safe reintegration of offenders into the community and reflect the respect for the dignity of all individuals. The IPS project is an example of excellent public and private sector collaboration that maintains family relations."



The Deputy Commissioner of Prisons Major-General Daniel Avidan accepted the award on behalf of the Israel Prison Service and the Adler Institute.

Photo courtesy of ICPA
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new place in the family

- To teach relationship-building skills and how to encourage communication, how to allow children to develop responsible independence.

Program Design

The program consists of 12 meetings of a group with 10-15 members. Each group is moderated by a professional from the Adler Institute, who volunteers his or her services. The small group allows for enriching group dynamics: each parent can share his problems with the others; he gives to and takes from the whole group. Special attention is paid to the ways that the group and the moderator relate to the dilemmas brought up by individual members.

Group activities combine theoretical material, group exercises, discussions and role-play but the content mix will depend on the character of the prison and the inmate population and their specific needs. The following are a few of the courses developed during the 12 years the program has been running.

1. **Parenting Course** – Several sessions may be devoted to a specific aspect of child raising, e.g., Boundaries in parent-child relationships, or “The Secret”.

2. **Partnership** – In this workshop participants learn to understand the role of the male in partnerships, choosing a partner, “Where did love go?”, cooperation between partners ‘in peace and war’, the influence of the extended family on the couple, abusing the children as a weapon in a parental battle.
3. **First Aid** – Groups for parents in custody and awaiting trial. Parents arrested for the first time are in severe crisis. The parent is preoccupied by his own problems and new circumstances. The family blames him, shifting the responsibility for their own distress onto him, which in turn only reinforces his self-preoccupation and withdrawal from his family. In the group the parents deal with the blame they have for the whole world and the denial of their own acts.
4. **Preventing domestic violence**
5. **Adolescence** – for parents of adolescents.

Evaluation

Feedback sessions with the inmates show that the course does succeed in bringing participants to see the family unit

from a totally different perspective. Parents who last the course develop more democratic and tolerant parental attitudes than inmates who do not. Bear in mind that parent-inmates are forced to cope with more complicated and painful questions than normal parents. For example, “Does the inmate have the right to educate his child to be an honest citizen when he himself has failed in his duties both as parent and citizen?” or “How to cope with the secret of the father’s incarceration? Should the child be told the truth? Will the truth hurt the child?” Many inmates fear their children will blame and judge them for their crimes and so choose to distance themselves from the children. In the parenting group, inmates learn to understand that children will not judge them for their acts as citizens but for being absent as a parent. Once this is absorbed, inmates realize that their children need them for their development. They come to understand the importance of functioning as a father in spite of imprisonment and that they still have an important role to play in holding the family unit together.

The steady expansion of the program over the years is in itself evidence of success. The willingness of inmates to participate in ‘educational’ groups is by no means common in prison society and inmates tend to stay away from programs that do not interest them or do not answer their needs.

We may conclude with the words of one program participant:

“I and my daughter”

When I spoke with my 12-year-old daughter, I found I was the only one talking, because during the whole conversation she would only say “yes” or “no”. I felt really bad because I wanted her to share everything with me. I felt incompetent and frustrated. One day I heard about the Adler program and I just went there. Once in the program, I came to understand what was missing in communicating with my daughter and I finished the program with great success. I began practicing what I learned even over the telephone. I began sharing things with my daughter and consulting her and made her

feel that she’s part of me and that I was telling her everything. Then the miracle happened and she also started to share things with me, laughing with me and smiling at me. I couldn’t help crying, suddenly I felt a fatherly feeling that made me feel good about myself and love my child.

Today I have good relations with my daughter and my family and Adler played an important part in this. I thank the program for all it gave me and my family.

The Adler Institute program coordinator is Mrs. Tami Yiflah. The Department of Community and Family Affairs of the Israel Ministry of Education provides professional consultation and partial funding. All programming is planned in cooperation with the IPS Education Branch, and Branch staff in the prisons are also responsible for the program’s organizational needs at all stages.

