

# LIVING INTERACTIVE FAMILY EDUCATION

**L.I.F.E.**

**CASE STUDY**

*The L.I.F.E. program was developed in 1999 by the University of Missouri Extension to increase children's self-esteem and social skills through enhanced relationships with their incarcerated fathers.*



## *The L.I.F.E. Program in Action*

**O**n the second Saturday of every month, a small group of children, most between the ages of 11 and 14, make preparations to attend their regular 4-H Club meeting. Some are shy and withdrawn, others are noisy and boisterous, but they share one thing in common. They all have a father, grandfather, or some other significant man in their lives who is incarcerated. The 4-H meeting they attend is held at the Potosi Correctional Center, a state-run maximum security prison in Mineral Point, Missouri.

Typically, the children's custodial parents take them out to Potosi for the meeting, sometimes traveling two to three hours. But for many of the children, there is no consistent parent or caregiver. One boy lived with his mother when the program first started, then moved in with his grandparents and is now living with an aunt. The stress of his transient life is often visible on his face and in his body language. Children who have a parent in prison can experience feelings of abandonment, isolation, sadness, and anger, all of which may lead to eating and sleeping



disorders, lower academic performance, and disruptive behavior. They also have an increased likelihood of being imprisoned themselves at some point in their lives.

Visiting hours at Potosi are 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM. Most of the families come and spend the day. When they arrive they must submit to the prison's various security measures. Then they enter the traditional visiting room which is supervised by guards who watch every move the offenders make. The visitors are allowed one hug or kiss and then the children sit at a table across from their fathers who are required to keep their hands in full view at all times.

At 11:00 AM the 4-H staff arrive and security guards escort the group into a different visiting room that is open and more relaxed. Things start off slowly, allowing for some free time for children and fathers to hug, play around a little and get reconnected. Then the formal meeting begins and runs until 2:00 PM. Every meeting begins with the Pledge of Allegiance, the 4-H Pledge, followed by the Club song and a short business meeting. After that, the children, their fathers, and other caregivers participate in: 1) educational activities that the fathers refer to as life lessons; 2) a craft project that families work on together and that the children can take home with them; and 3) a physical challenge activity focused on some positive goal, like team-building.

As the following quotes demonstrate, parents have reacted to the program very favorably:

*“ The situation in the [traditional] visiting room is very structured and very restricted. [The L.I.F.E. program] is a chance for my husband and his grandson to interact better and to actually be a family together. ”*

*Edna Harden, Step-Grandmother*

*“ I don't want my son to think that I don't love him—and I know the only way to really express it is to spend a little quality time with him—to share some moments together. ”*

*Joe Powell, Father, L.I.F.E. Charter Member*

*“ Some of the visiting room rules are lifted and we're allowed to do things that we normally wouldn't do on a regular visit—such as throw a ball, wrestle, horseplay—things that a father normally does with his kids. It also gives you a chance to get to know your kids better and to help them to try and not make the same mistakes that you did and maybe wind up in a place like this. ”*

*Scott Fox, Father, L.I.F.E. Charter Member*

## *Key Components*

**4-H Activities:** Youth attend monthly meetings with their fathers and other adult caregivers in a comfortable visitation atmosphere that is conducive to positive physical and verbal interaction. During these sessions, children and their fathers work together on traditional 4-H club activities such as arts and crafts projects and other curricula-based activities focusing on topics such as conflict resolution, substance abuse resistance, teamwork, and character development.

**Parenting Skills Classes:** All fathers in the program attend monthly classes designed to help them become a positive influence in their children's lives. Classes focus on such areas as communication, anger management, teamwork and positive discipline. The fathers, who have played a major role in designing the format of the program, participate in an additional meeting every month to plan upcoming program activities and help determine policies such as membership requirements. The fact that the fathers participate in planning the 4-H meeting day is one of the most significant features of the program. Most enhanced visitation programs are planned by prison staff.

## *What's unique about L.I.F.E.?*

According to 4-H Youth Specialist Lynna Lawson, it's the simple fact that her organization is running a 4-H program in a prison. 4-H believes that their youth programs should be available to all young people. This includes children of incarcerated parents, a population often overlooked or completely forgotten. It has taken a lot of coordination with the Potosi Correctional Center staff to get restrictions lifted and identify fathers appropriate for the program. This was new territory for 4-H staff and there has been some controversy as to whether prison is an appropriate venue for a 4-H program. As a result of many meetings with key stakeholders, much of the opposition has faded. The L.I.F.E. program has helped people, both inside and outside the 4-H program, to see youth with incarcerated family members as deserving of services. Once participants get into their specially designated space at Potosi and the L.I.F.E. program actually begins, it looks no different from many other 4-H programs.



## *Goals and Desired Outcomes*

The overall goals of the program are:

- To help children and youth successfully overcome some of the challenges of parental incarceration such as feelings of abandonment, isolation, sadness, and anger, all of which may lead to eating and sleeping disorders, lower academic performance, and disruptive behavior.
- To promote a strong, healthy, and nurturing family environment for children of incarcerated parents, while helping the parents become positive role models and mentors.

Anticipated long-term outcomes for youth:

- Improving children's self-esteem and social skills.
- Reducing their sense of isolation.
- Helping them stay in school longer.
- Helping them maintain long-term relationships with their fathers.
- Helping them become leaders and better citizens.
- Reducing their risk of incarceration.

## *The Research Design*

**The evaluation of the L.I.F.E. program was conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Dunn and sponsored by the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Project at the University of Missouri funded by CSREES, USDA.** The research design included five components: 1) a literature review of the impact of enhanced visitation programs; 2) a Program Logic Model; 3) an output tracking system; 4) a formal focus group involving the fathers; and 5) a life skills survey administered at two points in time: July 2002 and January 2003. The life skills survey, which was adapted from several existing questionnaires, was designed to assess participants' skills in seven categories—academics and learning, communication, decision making, goal setting and goal achievement, problem solving, self-esteem, and social competencies.

The Program Logic Model—developed jointly by program staff, participants, community stakeholders, and the program evaluators—lists the inputs, activities, and outputs of the program, and illustrates how L.I.F.E.'s design is expected to lead to program results. The output tracking system documents which program activities have taken place, who attended, and so on.



## *Making a Difference!*

- Youths' scores on the life skills survey increased over time. The scores in the July 2002 round of the assessment provide a baseline picture of how the participants rated themselves in key life skills areas. The average total score for the sample was only 94 out of a possible 140 points. This indicates that, on average, respondents did not rate themselves highly in a number of skills areas. By January 2003 the average score on the life skills survey had increased to 105 out of a possible 140 points. The most significant gains were in the areas of social competencies, communication, and decision-making.
- L.I.F.E. program staff have observed that many of the club members participating in the program no longer see their father as a stranger and are more likely to have a meaningful parent/child relationship with him—including being willing to take direction from him. The children also feel much less isolated; they know they aren't alone, and they are making ongoing friendships with other children in the same situation.

In the focus groups, fathers or other significant men in their lives reported that they had observed evidence of the following outcomes:

- More satisfying relationships with their children, through the development of mutual respect and working side by side on projects and activities.
- Strengthened lines of communication among their children, the caregivers and themselves.
- A sense of family unity.
- The development of important life skills in their children, including leadership, empathy, and self-control.
- Improvement in their children's behavior and academic performance.

Given the limited time frame of this program, the researchers were unable to determine any long-term outcomes. Instead, they looked carefully at the results of other evaluations and felt that it was reasonable to assume they would find similar outcomes in the L.I.F.E. program. The research shows that children who have healthy relationships with their



incarcerated parents avoid some of the negative effects of separation, resulting in happier, more successful, better-adjusted lives. They score higher on measures of well-being, intelligence, and emotional and behavioral measures.

## *Program Tips*

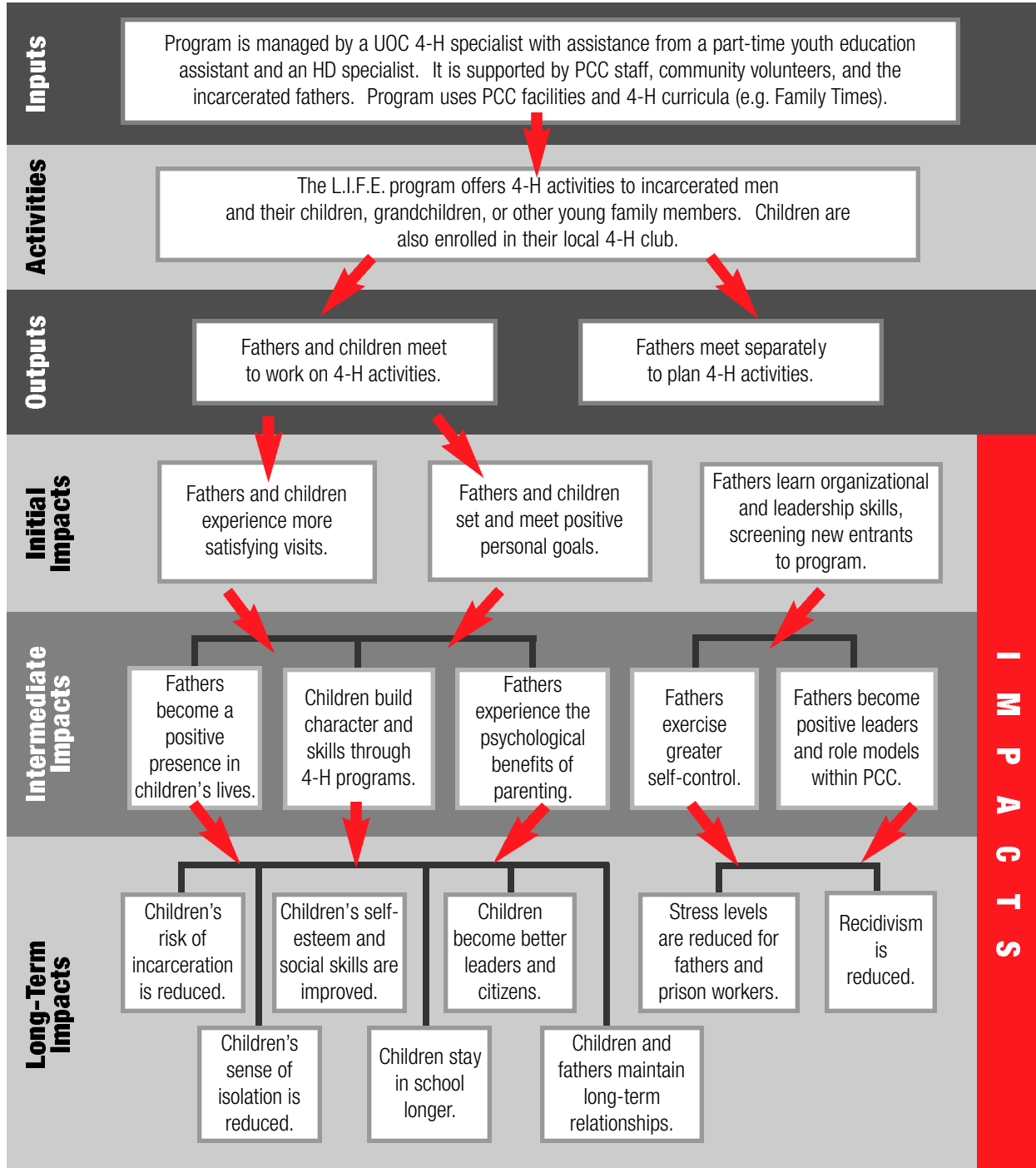
- Be prepared for the frustration that goes along with implementing a program in a prison. In this case, the Missouri Department of Corrections takes considerable time to make decisions and their primary concern is security. Moreover, in the five years that L.I.F.E. has been operating, there have been four different superintendents and the guidelines have changed many times. For example, after several years of providing refreshments for the program, staff were told they could no longer bring in food. Specific guidelines and policies will vary from state to state and institution to institution. Patience and perseverance are required to make such an innovative program work.
- Be flexible. 4-H staff had many original ideas about program implementation that they have had to abandon along the way. For example, they had planned to include only the youth and fathers in the actual 4-H session and give the caregivers their own separate meeting. But the caregivers resisted this model, feeling that they would be missing out on the fun and family time.
- Expect some opposition. Have a plan in place to educate your own organization, the community, club members and their families. Build time into the early stages of your program implementation schedule for this process. 4-H staff began designing L.I.F.E. in November 1999 and the first session didn't take place until the following March.
- Know your audience. The children of incarcerated parents are likely to have both problems and a lot of strengths. There is a burden of shame that they and their families carry and this is not something they like to talk about. It may take a little while to get them to open up and participate, because they often feel vulnerable. Staff members need to work hard to build trust.
- It can be intimidating to walk into a correctional center, especially in the beginning; but once you get to know the offenders, the security guards and the staff, it gets much easier. Most institutions offer an orientation to educate volunteers and the staffs of outside agencies about security guidelines—including what can and cannot be brought into the facility—and tips for interacting with the offenders.



FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE PROGRAM  
Program Logic Model for

**Potosi Correctional Center (PCC)**

**Living Interactive Family Education Program (L.I.F.E.)**



<http://outreach.missouri.edu/fcrp/evaluation.htm>

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