

Classes Turning Incarcerated Juvenile Fathers Into Dads

By **Ryann Blackshere** (<https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/author?id=43>), August 12, 2013



(https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/xpanel/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/DSC_0154.jpg) Saturday afternoons are Jay's favorite in the Sacramento County Juvenile Detention Center.

On those days, the guards unlock the iron doors of his all-male residential unit. After walking through the door, he enters the visiting room, a septic, egg-shell colored area with cement walls and silver metal tables.

He passes through to a small visitation room, usually reserved for social workers and lawyers. There are rays of light, ranging

from orange to blue, with a paper mural of all the Sesame Street gang.

That's where Jay walks toward in his assigned yellow sweatshirt and navy blue sweatpants. That's where his five-month-old son will meet him for an hour.

On Saturdays, he's not just an inmate. He's a dad.

Jay is a participant of the **Just Beginning program** (<http://www.ylc.org/our-work/action-litigation/juvenile-institutional-conditions-example/incarcerated-teen-parenting-program/>), which teaches parenting skills to incarcerated juvenile parents. Fourteen percent of incarcerated juveniles have children, according to a **2012 survey by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention** (<https://syrrp.org/images/Youth%20Characteristics.pdf>) (OJJDP). By comparison, 2 percent of males ages 12-20 in the general population have children.

In the Just Beginning program, parents learn lessons on early child development based on Sesame Street curriculum, and then implement what they learn during visits with their children. Just Beginning is father-focused, but incarcerated moms can participate as well in facilities that house both genders.



(https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/xpanel/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/DSC_0153.jpg) Jay was one of the inmates who designed the paper mural for the Just Beginning visitation room.

“It’s cool,” Jay says about the program. “It will help me with the responsibilities. I have a thought of how it will be.”

The program is currently operating in juvenile facilities located in five California cities, and two cities in Ohio. There are roughly 60 participants in the program nationwide.

Jay said that because he has three younger sisters and three younger brothers, he thought he was prepared to be a father, and that his step-father gave him an idea of how to be a parent.

But Jay was four months into his detention center time when his son was born, and he has now been locked up for nine months.

“I didn’t think I would be here when my son arrived,” he said.

“That’s the vision of the program, that there will be a slice of the institution that connects them back to society,” said Ben Richeda, program director of the Just Beginning program at the **Youth Law Center (<http://www.ylc.org/>)** (YLC), a San Francisco-based legal advocacy non-profit. The facilities are “developing a culture of fatherhood and really embracing the idea of turning these fathers into dads.”

The Youth Law Center created the program in 2009 with the help of Georgetown University. Using a curriculum that a Georgetown researcher had developed for Sesame Street, the Youth Law Center started its mission to teach fathers parenting skills while in jail.

The program was originally named “A Parenting Intervention for Incarcerated Teen Parents,” but teen parents called it the “Just Beginning Program” in honor of the famous red character shown in the videos during the classes. YLC interpreted the nickname as a sign of the affection the youth felt for the program, and changed the name.

The goal is for fathers and their children to connect and build a relationship. There are four basic skills taught during the course:

- Physical touch and contact
- Building emotional attachment
- Following the child’s pattern of behavior
- Talking to a baby in a positive and supportive manner

Each facility designates a staff member to facilitate the classes, and pays for the program either with grants or discretionary funding. According to YLC, the program usually costs about \$15,000 to implement in the first year. This includes materials, training hours, and paying for a YLC staff member to visit the site and help begin the program. During the second year the funding decreases, but quarterly visits from the YLC staff member continue.



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All of those themes are reinforced throughout the course and implemented during the child's weekly visits to the facility with the parent. YLC videotapes each parent-child visitation, to monitor whether or not the lessons are being learned. Then those tapes are sent to Georgetown to be entered into research logs for evaluation of the program.

"It works, and it's effective because these fathers want to be good fathers but haven't had the opportunity to do so, said

Carole Shauffer, YLC's senior director of strategic initiatives. "It humanizes the institution and the staff and the youth."

Shauffer says they've heard anecdotally that participants are so inspired by their role as parents that the facilities have witnessed less behavioral issues, and relationships with staff have improved because the youth are seen as young parents as opposed to criminals.

Stacy Gustafson, the deputy probation assistant who facilitates the program in Sacramento, says she has seen a definite change in Jay since he started the program a year ago.

"He's grown up a lot with this program, just his maturity and his mindset," she said. "He's always willing to help. I think he'll be one who succeeds when he gets out of here."

She is also a parent of boys, so during their sessions Gustafson sometimes shares with Jay tips on how she interacts with her children. There is one other young father currently in the Sacramento program. But his involvement is less consistent.

"The other boy's child's mother says he doesn't deserve to see his son, so she doesn't always bring him," said Gustafson.

What has kept many fathers in the program has been the reduction of workshops.

"When I first took over it was 10 weeks, but they cut it down to five, which helped us out a lot because the kids weren't completing before they left," Gustafson said. "So the shorter program helped."

For those who have longer periods in detention, the facilitator continues to reinforce and expand upon lessons that the parent has already learned. YLC says more parents are completing the program as a result.

Fifty-three percent of incarcerated juveniles grew up with one parent or none at all, according to OJJDP. Through developing parenting skills and regular visitation, Just Beginning is working to break that cycle.

"By helping the father connect or maintain connection, these programs are critical to ultimately reducing recidivism and strengthening connections," said Christopher Brown, executive vice president of the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Brown believes that parenting programs like Just Beginning help reduce the chances that the fathers will re-enter a prison facility, and that their sons will do the same.

"When boys grow up without an involved father in their lives, they are at greater risk of being incarcerated," said Brown.

Jay says the class helps him understand what to do so that his son won't end up where he is.

“I got to stay on him,” he said. “Watch the friends he has, make sure he has good grades. That’s the main thing. Learning from my mistake, I’ll be able to tell him what not to do.”

Note: This story uses the name “Jay” to conceal the identity of the young man interviewed for this story, who is still a juvenile.

Ryann Blackshere is a staff reporter for the Chronicle of Social Change.

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The YLC says having a colorful room helps reduce environment anxiety for the children when they visit their parents inside a facility, along with “stranger danger.”