

# SUPPORTING PARENTS AND CHILDREN DURING INCARCERATION: EVALUATION OF THE PARENTING INSIDE OUT PROGRAM IN WISCONSIN STATE PRISONS

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## OVERVIEW

In 2020, the Wisconsin Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board (CANPB), researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-MADISON), and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WI DOC) partnered to implement and evaluate Parenting Inside Out (PIO-90).<sup>1</sup> The four participating prisons included Green Bay Correctional Institution (GBCI), Milwaukee Women’s Correctional Center (MWCC), Taycheedah Correctional Institution (TCI), and Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center (REECC).<sup>2</sup> Parenting Inside Out is an evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral parent management skills training program that promotes parenting skills and parent-child bonds through effective communication, problem-solving strategies, positive reinforcement, monitoring, and constructive discipline.

<sup>1</sup> Parenting Inside Out-90 refers to 90 hours of manualized curriculum that is delivered to parents. It typically takes 3 - 4½ months to complete one programming cycle of PIO-90. Other versions of PIO are shorter and used in a variety of settings including PIO-60 (prisons), PIO-48 (community reentry), and PIO-24 (jails). For the purposes of this brief, we will refer to PIO-90 as PIO. For more information about PIO, please visit [www.parentinginsideout.org](http://www.parentinginsideout.org)

<sup>2</sup> GBCI is a maximum-security prison for men. The remaining three prisons make up the Wisconsin Women’s Correctional System and are female-only facilities. MWCC is a minimum-security prison; TCI is a maximum- and medium-security prison; and REECC is a minimum-security prison.



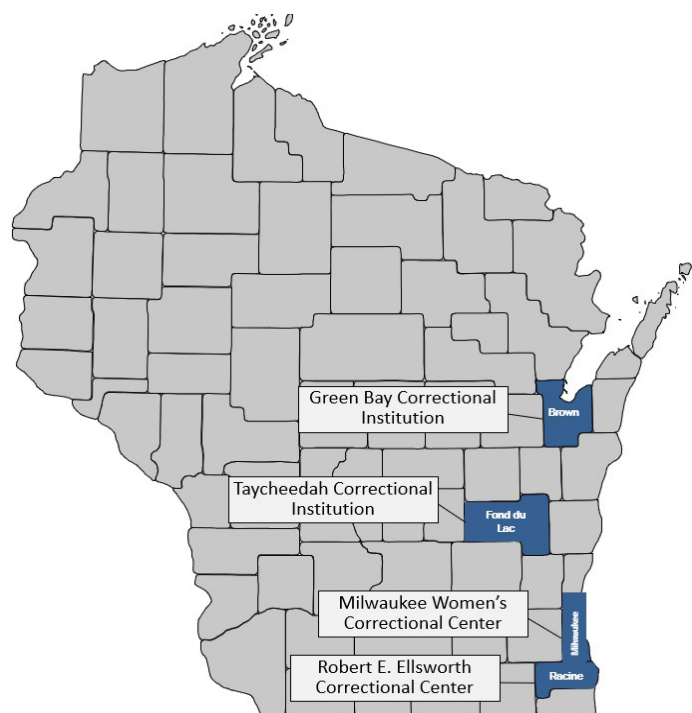
## WISCONSIN PRISONS WHERE PIO WAS IMPLEMENTED & EVALUATED

In support of the project's goals, the UW-Madison team led implementation and evaluation activities between October 2020 and June 2024. This included the provision of training and technical assistance to facilitate the delivery of PIO in the four prisons and the collection of surveys completed by participating parents. WI DOC employees including social workers and other trained staff delivered the program. The evaluation set out to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is participation in PIO associated with change in behaviors, attitudes, and skills related to parenting and family relationships?
- 2) What are parents' experiences in the PIO program?

This brief summarizes findings from the evaluation drawing on surveys completed before and after the program by 99 parents who finished the program.<sup>3</sup>

Lessons learned from the implementation phase of the project and practical strategies to help corrections staff implement PIO in prisons and other correctional settings are summarized elsewhere and available on the Parenting Inside Out website in the report, ["Supporting Incarcerated Parents and Children: An Implementation Toolkit for Parenting Inside Out in Prisons."](#)



*For more information about the Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention Board's approach which includes family strengthening, building protective factors, and partnering with parents in Wisconsin, visit the agency's web page at <https://preventionboard.wi.gov/Pages/Homepage.aspx>.*

*For more information about other research projects that focus on supporting parents and children affected by the criminal legal system, visit Dr. Charles' web page at <https://familywellbeingandjustice.com/>.*

<sup>3</sup> Among those screened for PIO participation, 132 parents met eligibility criteria and enrolled in the PIO program. Of this group, 99 parents (75%) completed PIO, as well as the pre-test and post-test surveys before and after the program. Slightly fewer parents (96 or 73%) completed feedback forms after the program ended. The feedback forms were only available after the program because they focused on people's experience in PIO.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPATING PARENTS

As seen in Table 1, most parents who completed PIO were mothers. Parents were primarily Non-Hispanic White (51%) and Non-Hispanic Black (24%). The majority had at least a 5th grade reading level or a literacy plan in place to support them during the program. Mothers and fathers were on average 32 years old and had two children. Very few (4%) were prevented from having contact with their child and almost all the parents were in communication with the caregiver of their child. Almost two-fifths of the participants were mandated to participate in some type of parenting program and for these parents, PIO fulfilled the requirement.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N = 99)

CHARACTERISTIC	N	PERCENTAGE	AVERAGE (SD)
GENDER			
Female	81	82%	
Male	18	18%	
RACE AND ETHNICITY			
Hispanic	12	12%	
Non-Hispanic Black	24	24%	
Non-Hispanic Other	11	11%	
Non-Hispanic White	50	51%	
Missing	2	2%	
AGE OF PARENT ( <i>n</i> = 94)			32.0 (6.3)
SPEAKS AND READS ENGLISH			
Yes	88	89%	
No	1	1%	
Missing	10	10%	
AT LEAST 5TH GRADE READING LEVEL OR LITERACY PLAN IN PLACE			
Yes	84	85%	
No	7	7%	
Missing	8	8%	
NUMBER OF CHILDREN LESS THAN AGE 18 ( <i>n</i> = 92)			2.6 (1.4)
PARENT PREVENTED FROM HAVING CONTACT WITH CHILD			
Yes	3	3%	
No	81	82%	
Missing	15	15%	
PARENT HAS CONTACT WITH CAREGIVER OF CHILD			
Yes	87	88%	
No	2	2%	
Missing	10	10%	
PARENTING PROGRAM IS MANDATED			
Yes	34	34%	
No	55	56%	
Missing	10	10%	

Note: SD = standard deviation.

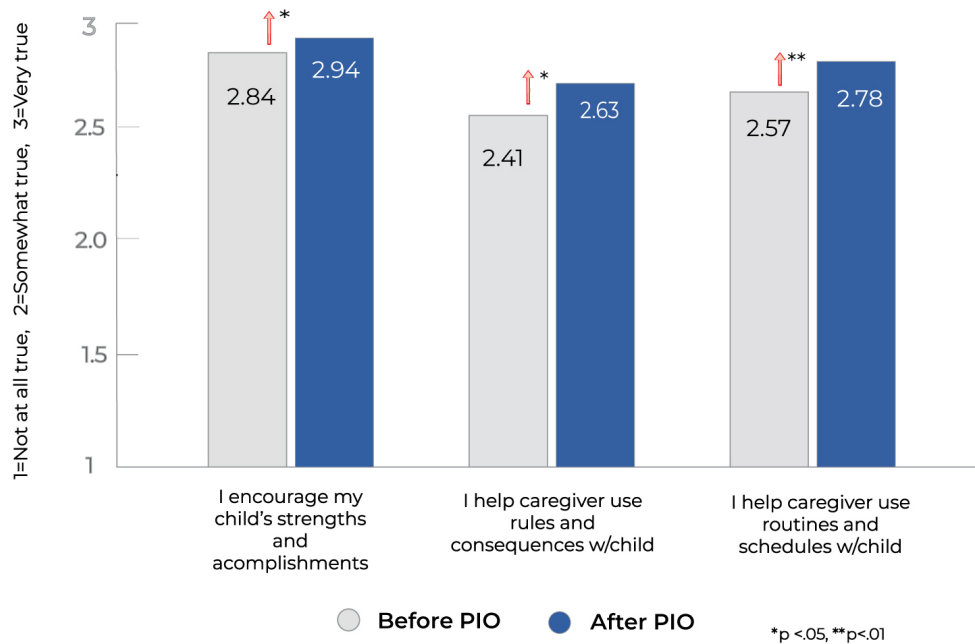
# CHANGES IN OUTCOMES AFTER PARTICIPATING IN PIO

## PARENT-CHILD AND PARENT-CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP

- Nearly all parents (99%) reported that the quality of their relationships with their children improved after participating in PIO.
- Approximately 41% of parents also reported an increase in satisfaction with the relationships they have with their children’s caregivers after the program.
- As seen in Figure 1, parents showed an increase in several other parent-child and caregiver domains including:<sup>4</sup>

- ◇ encouragement of their **child’s strengths and accomplishments**
- ◇ helping the caregiver to use **rules and consequences with the child**
- ◇ helping the caregiver provide **structure to the child through routines and schedules** at home.

Figure 1. Parent-Child and Caregiver Relationships Before and After PIO Participation



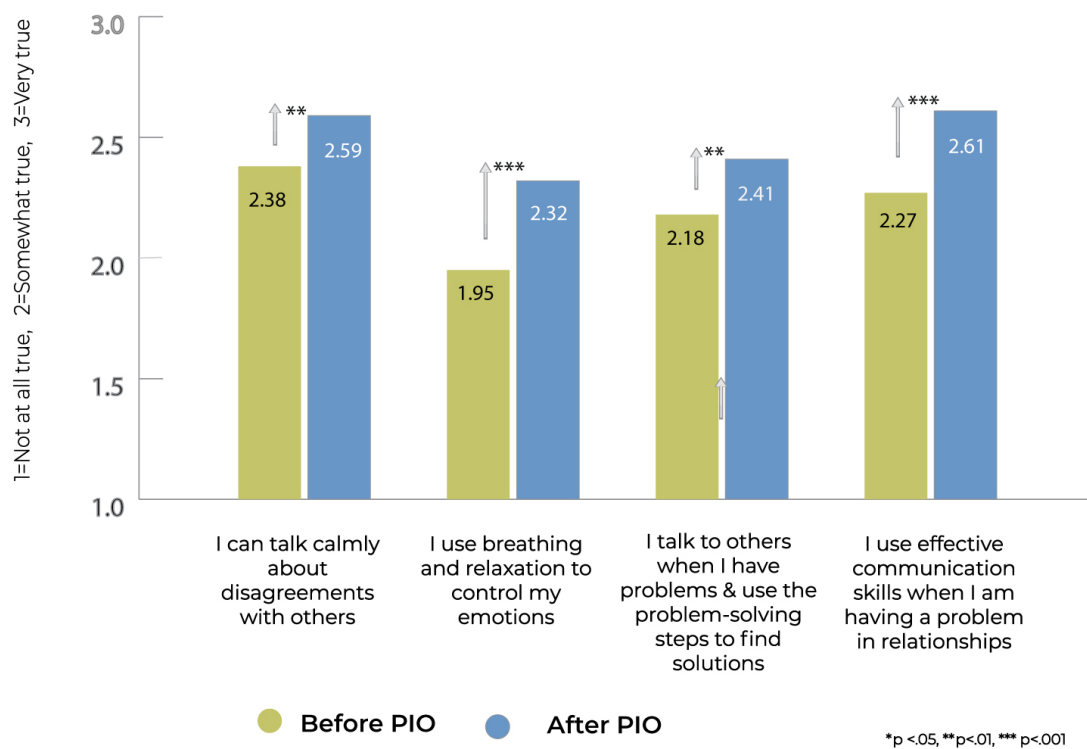
<sup>4</sup> The results suggest that parents’ encouragement of their children’s strengths and accomplishments after PIO (M=2.94, SD=.25) was significantly higher than before PIO (M=2.84, SD=.36);  $t(167) = 2.03$ ,  $p = 0.04$ . The same pattern was found for helping caregivers use rules and consequences with the child after PIO (M=2.63, SD=.55) compared to before PIO (M=2.41, SD=.61);  $t(181) = 2.49$ ,  $p = 0.01$  and helping caregivers provide structure to the child through routines and schedules after PIO (M=2.78, SD=.44) compared to before PIO (M=2.57, SD=.61);  $t(173) = 2.67$ ,  $p = 0.008$ .

## PARENTS' EMOTION REGULATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Parents reported an increase in their ability to use skills that are important in developing and maintaining healthy relationships after completing the PIO program. For example, as seen in Figure 2 below, they reported positive changes in their:<sup>5</sup>

- ◇ **ability to talk calmly** about disagreements with others
- ◇ **use of breathing and relaxation strategies** to control their emotions
- ◇ ability to talk to others when they have a problem and **use problem-solving steps** to identify solutions
- ◇ use of **effective communication skills** when they are having a relationship problem.

Figure 2. Parents' Emotion Regulation and Problem-Solving Skills Before and After PIO



<sup>5</sup> The findings indicate that parents' ability to talk calmly about disagreements with others after PIO ( $M=2.59$ ,  $SD=.49$ ) was significantly higher than before PIO ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=.55$ );  $t(190) = 2.82$ ,  $p = 0.005$ , as was their ability to use breathing and relaxation to control their emotions after PIO ( $M=2.32$ ,  $SD=.63$ ) compared to before PIO ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.76$ );  $t(184) = 3.72$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . A similar trend was found for talking to others and using problem-solving steps to resolve issues after PIO ( $M=2.41$ ,  $SD=.52$ ) compared to before PIO ( $M=2.18$ ,  $SD=.56$ );  $t(190) = 2.97$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Finally, there was an increase in the use of effective communication skills when having a problem in relationships after PIO ( $M=2.61$ ,  $SD=.49$ ) compared to before PIO ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=.53$ );  $t(191) = 4.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

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## PARENT FEEDBACK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE IN PIO

Overall, mothers and fathers expressed positive feelings and thoughts about their participation in PIO.

### *Helpfulness of the Program*

- 95.7% of parents said that PIO was “quite” or “very” helpful to them.
- 96.8% reported that what they learned in PIO will be “quite” or “very” helpful for their children once they are released.

### *Effect of the Program on Parent and Child*

- 97.9% and 96.6% of parents said they think the program had a “positive” or “very positive” effect on them and their child, respectively.

### *Recommendation*

- Parents strongly endorsed the program with an average recommendation score of 4.6 where 1 = strongly not recommend and 5 = strongly recommend.
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Parents also shared their perspective when asked to reflect on their experience in the program.

*“Overall, I’m very grateful and appreciative for everything that I learned in PIO. It taught me a tremendous amount of respect, empathy, self-discipline, structure, and functional parenting! I’m thankful and appreciative for our PIO coaches!”* Father at Green Bay Correctional Institution

*“A major strength of this program is that it teaches you how to better communicate with our children and their caregivers.”* Mother at Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center

*“This was a great experience, and I am very thankful for the opportunity. I’ve learned some good life skills like effective listening, communication, and being more empathetic. I will better be able to connect with my daughters when the time comes.”* Father at Green Bay Correctional Institution

*“This program covered more about parenting than I thought anything could. If there was a ‘parenting manual,’ it would be this program.”* Mother at Milwaukee Women’s Correctional Center

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## PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM

Parents reported a range of parenting attitudes, skills, and behaviors that they thought had changed because of their engagement with Parenting Inside Out. Highlights include:

- ◇ More than three out of five parents (64%) said the program had “very much” changed their ability to **help their child live a good life**.
- ◇ 88% of parents reported that PIO had “a lot” or “very much” changed **how well they get along with their child**.
- ◇ Parents said the program changed the amount of **yelling they will do at their child** “a little” or “some” (17%) or “a lot” or “very much” (69%).
- ◇ 94% of parents said that the program had “a lot” or “very much” changed how **happy and satisfied they are with being a parent** to their child.

Parents also responded to open-ended questions about ways in which they thought they would act differently because of the program. Many of the responses related to their parenting skills, as well as the relationship they have with the caregiver of their child.

*“This parenting group has opened a whole new world to me as far as being a parent and a man. I’m not saying every facilitator will be as amazing as ours, but I will recommend to every parent that wants to have an active part in their kid’s life to take the parenting course because it will open up a whole new world!”* Father at Green Bay Correctional Institution

*“I will be more flexible and understanding according to my kids’ ages, stages, and ‘jobs’.”* Mother at Taycheedah Correctional Institution

Figure 3. PIO class at participating prison



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*“I will communicate more effectively and discipline appropriately.”* Mother at Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center

*“I’ll practice all the tools I’ve learned such as emotion regulation, effective listening, speaking, privilege removal, time outs, setting boundaries, providing structure, and having family nights. Most importantly, being positively present.”* Father at Green Bay Correctional Institution

## SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS

Parents provided suggestions for programming changes to improve future participants’ experiences. Ideas ranged from making modifications to the current PIO curriculum to extending the program to serve parents after they are released from prison.

### Changes to Existing Curriculum

*“I think something for parents with older children would be nice too – where they could practice parent-teacher conferences, learn about resources, etc.”* Mother at Milwaukee Women’s Correctional Center

### Opportunities for Contact with Children

*“If our children were able to come here, and we (could) have the hands-on effect to use some of the skills.”* Mother at Taycheedah Correctional Institution

### Program Expansions

*“Try to establish contact with newly released parents and possibly start a post-release group for formerly incarcerated parents.”* Father at Green Bay Correctional Institution

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Despite the many positive findings from the evaluation of the Parenting Inside Out program in four Wisconsin prisons, there are limitations worth noting about the evaluation.

- » First, there was no long-term follow-up of participants or use of administrative data in the evaluation. These strategies would help assess the sustainability of the outcomes and determine if effects are present in other domains such as behavioral infractions during incarceration and recidivism after release.
- » Second, caregivers and children were excluded from the evaluation. Their experience would be valuable to include in order to enhance our understanding of how the program influences other members of the family.
- » Third, because of the study’s design, we cannot definitively conclude that the positive changes observed were because of the program. A more rigorous research design could help to better establish causality.
- » Finally, the evaluation was hampered by staffing shortages across the participating prisons. This in turn impacted the frequency of the delivery of PIO. Future evaluations would benefit from increasing the number of participating prisons and ensuring regular delivery of the program across the evaluation period.



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## SUMMARY

- » Overall, the implementation and evaluation of Parenting Inside Out was successful, and results demonstrated generally encouraging findings.
- » Participation in PIO appeared to have positive effects on parents' relationships with their children and the caregivers of their children.
- » Newly acquired parenting skills and strategies seemed especially useful when shared with children's caregivers at home.
- » Complementary tools such as emotion regulation, problem-solving, and communication skills, were positively impacted.
- » Parents offered helpful feedback that was constructive and reflected a largely positive experience.

On the whole, the Parenting Inside Out program was widely accepted by program participants and showed promising results in the evaluation. PIO's focus on supporting incarcerated parents and their children in positive ways, combined with its history as an evidence-based practice, calls for expansion efforts to implement the program in more WI prisons. This could be particularly beneficial in helping parents build strong family bonds and prepare for the transition back to the community.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*For more information about this report, contact Pajarita Charles, University of Wisconsin-Madison Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work, [paja.charles@wisc.edu](mailto:paja.charles@wisc.edu).*

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