

Why Ask About Family?

By looking beyond the individual to families and social supports, corrections officers can help improve public safety and other outcomes.

A Guide for Corrections

Working in corrections can be rewarding. But it is also extremely challenging. The daily demands don't always leave room to think about the families of people who are in jail or prison. Yet families and other social supports can help individuals succeed while they are incarcerated and afterward, leading to better outcomes for the facility and greater public safety.

Corrections professionals can help—without starting new programs or taking on additional tasks—just by adopting a few simple concepts, tools, and techniques.

This guide describes the principles of a strength-based, family-focused approach in corrections practices, policy, and reentry planning that can make a difference. It was developed for correctional administrators, case managers, reentry and discharge planners, treatment-team members, institutional parole officers, and other personnel working in and around jails, prisons, and other corrections institutions.

WHAT DOES SUPPORTIVE CONTACT WITH FAMILY LOOK LIKE?

- > While in prison, Frank talks with his son by phone about his homework.
- > When Donna is about to come home from jail, her pastor brings her a list of N.A. meetings in their community and offers to go with her.
- > Even though Miguel's grandmother is unable to visit, she accepts his collect calls and writes to him every week. Miguel knows that she is in his corner, and he plans to live with her when he gets out.

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WHAT IS A STRENGTH-BASED, FAMILY-FOCUSED APPROACH?

A **strength-based approach** to working with incarcerated people

- > identifies the individuals and organizations that can help them address the challenges in their lives;
- > guides incarcerated individuals to tap these those resources;
- > emphasizes what is going right instead of what is going wrong; and
- > builds on people's skills and talents to reinforce their positive behavior and help them achieve their goals. (Research shows that positive reinforcement is more successful than negative reinforcement in changing behavior.')

A **family-focused approach**

- > considers individuals in the context of their family, broadly defined, and
- > regards the functioning and well-being of every person as affecting the well-being of other members of a family or social network.

Corrections professionals can help incarcerated people to draw on their natural support system and recognize a broader array of available resources. Encouraging incarcerated individuals to maintain positive ties and draw on their social networks helps them prepare for a successful return to the community.

Defining “Family” Broadly

Family may include traditional and non-traditional members. This may mean friends, significant others, clergy, co-workers, or other important people in one's social network.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Strength-based, family-focused work involves asking individuals about the promising and positive aspects of their lives and the people who are important to them. Try using supportive inquiry, which is exactly what it sounds like: asking questions that demonstrate your support.

Ask questions that can help identify people who are on their side.

- > Who helps you?
- > Who stays in touch with you?
- > Who is there for you?

Ask open-ended questions that keep the conversation going.

- > What is going well for you?
- > Who will be supportive when you go home?
- > Who will rely on you?

If you have the opportunity to talk with family members or other supportive visitors, acknowledge that their contact with the incarcerated person is important.

You might ask:

- > What keeps you going?
- > How have you managed?
- > What will make the transition easier when your son [granddaughter, boyfriend, father, etc.] comes home? Who can help you and your family with this?

The most effective questions reflect a genuine interest without expressing judgment or using labels.

THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

Like all of us, individuals who are incarcerated have many facets. We all reveal different aspects of ourselves depending on the circumstances. Using a strength-based approach when working with incarcerated individuals can help them to focus on their positive qualities—those that are likely to motivate good behavior. This may not be easy to do within the context of a jail or prison. But the following simple tools can help.

An **ecomap** is a diagram of formal and informal resources available to the incarcerated individual and his or her family. Formal resources may include child welfare agencies, parole supervision, public assistance, or a health clinic; informal options include a church or mosque, a sports team, or a 12-step group.

When used in reentry planning, an ecomap can lead to a discussion about the person's current connections and the connections they expect to have in the community. The process of creating an ecomap can bring to light conflicts, highlight the need for coordination of services, or reveal sources of support that might be tapped in new ways.

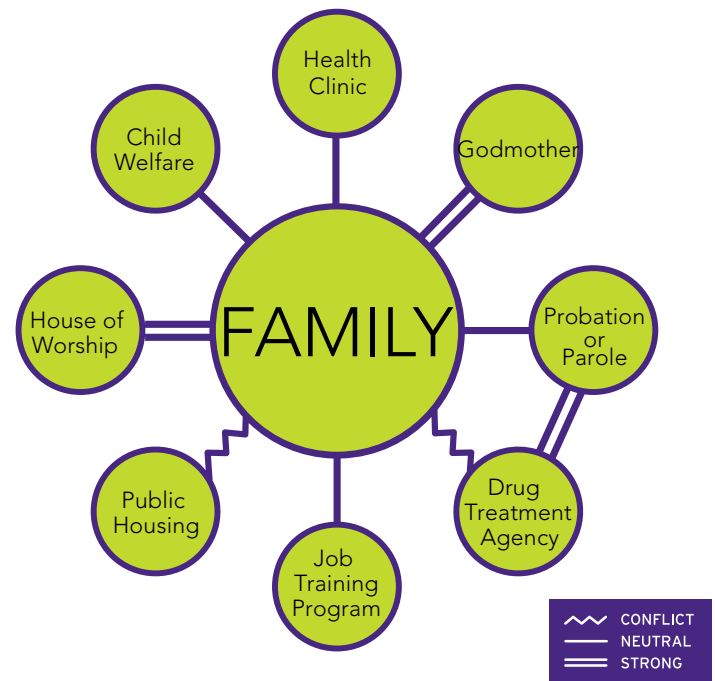
A **genogram** is a diagram of a family, broadly defined, that includes information about age, gender, and relationships, as well as family members' education, employment, and involvement in government systems. It is similar to a family tree, but can include nontraditional family members as well as visual representations of people's skills and other strengths.

The **Relational Inquiry Tool** is a list of eight carefully crafted questions supported by a training module.² Family Justice created the tool for corrections staff who provide day-to-day case management and develop reentry plans. The Relational Inquiry Tool complements standard risk and needs assessments by helping staff learn about families and social networks—key resources for successful reentry.

The goals of the tool are to

- > provide staff with an easy way to recognize and reinforce a person's positive connections to family and social networks during and after incarceration, and
- > build rapport between the professional using the tool and the incarcerated individual.

SAMPLE ECOMAP



“The Relational Inquiry Tool’s questions—‘Who helped you?’ and ‘How did you help your family before you came to prison?’—make [people] remember that they’re part of a society and part of a family. I think it makes them understand that they have support out there, but also that they can be supportive, too.”

—Correctional Case Manager, Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction

TAPPING SOCIAL NETWORKS

It is not enough to identify families and social networks as important resources. Corrections staff can also help people access that support—both during incarceration and after their return to the community.

> **BY STRENGTHENING SOCIAL SUPPORT, FAMILY VISITS CAN LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES.** Research shows that visits from supportive loved ones during incarceration can reduce and delay recidivism, especially when visits occur in the months leading up to release.³

> **IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THE BARRIERS THAT MAY KEEP LOVED ONES FROM VISITING.** Families often face obstacles to maintaining contact with an incarcerated loved one. They may, for example, lack transportation or information about visitation policies.⁴ Visiting an incarcerated loved one can also have significant social costs. Corrections professionals may want to consider how their facility's policies and practices could make visitation easier.

> **FAMILY SUPPORT PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SUCCESSFUL REENTRY.**⁵ Upon release, many individuals go home to communities characterized by poverty and the associated problems of crime, violence, substance use, and HIV/AIDS or other chronic illnesses.⁶ Under such difficult circumstances, support from a social network can help motivate and guide positive behavior.

Incarceration can weaken or even end important relationships. Corrections agencies may offset some such unintended consequences by developing and instituting policies that help incarcerated people to maintain positive social ties.

> **INCARCERATION AFFECTS THE ENTIRE FAMILY.** As one study concluded, "Criminal justice involvement impacts the life of a family in deep ways: it strains them financially, disrupts parental bonds, separates spouses, places severe stress on the remaining caregivers, leads to a loss of discipline in the household, and leads to feelings of shame, stigma, and anger."⁷

> **MOST PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED ARE PARENTS.**⁸ Because parents have a critical influence on their children's development, corrections professionals can play an important role by supporting positive family ties. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem, troubled behavior at school and at home, and isolation or withdrawal.⁹ They are also at a significantly higher risk for behavior problems and involvement with the juvenile justice system.¹⁰

Families and social networks can provide

- > emotional and financial support,
- > connection to potential employers upon reentry,
- > assessment of behavior and positive reinforcement,
- > child care and elder care,
- > housing and transportation upon reentry,
- > reconnection and reintegration to the community, and
- > monitoring of symptoms and changes in health.

"The fact that people are maintaining contact with their family has a settling effect on them. It creates less misconduct. It creates a calmer yard."

—Justin Jones, director,
Oklahoma Department of
Corrections

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

“Working with families would be like doubling my caseload. How can I take this on?”

- > Doing family-focused work does not require additional services or expertise. Nobody is trying to turn corrections professionals into social workers. The tools and methods described here build on what you are probably already doing.
- > Even if you don't meet their family members, you can help individuals incarcerated at your facility think about the resources in their social network. Just asking them a few questions can help to identify skills, talents, positive behaviors, and successful coping mechanisms of people in their lives. By helping them to mobilize those strengths, you and your colleagues can empower incarcerated people to grow and change.

“How do you know this works?”

- > An evaluation of Family Justice's approach to case management found it effective among individuals who have a history of drug use and are involved with the justice system. This approach also benefited their families.¹¹
- > Strength-based, family-focused work makes intuitive sense—and may be best understood by thinking about your own family and support network. Think about who influences and encourages you—and who relies on you. In most cases, it is family and loved ones. (See page 4.) When our perception of people does not include their family, we may be ignoring the most important influences in their lives. Not only can the family provide resources and support, but individuals may be more motivated when they want to fulfill responsibilities to the people close to them.
- > By encouraging people to seek solutions and resources within their family and community, this approach can help reduce reliance on costly social services.

“What if a person's family is a source of stress and not support?”

- > Unfortunately, that is sometimes the case. Pay attention if a person becomes agitated when talking about family or seems upset after having contact with loved ones. You may have an opportunity to discuss what is going on and explore constructive alternatives.

- > If someone cannot identify any supportive relatives, ask about other significant relationships. Remember to think about “family” in broad terms.
- > Relationships are dynamic and have the potential to change. Encourage people to stay connected during challenging times and to communicate with individuals who have been supportive in the past.

“Most families have their own problems. How are they supposed to help?”

- > Even seemingly fragile families have strengths and resources. Knowing about a person's social network can help you develop a more realistic and effective reentry plan.
- > The families of people who are incarcerated are often involved in other systems, such as drug treatment, public housing, child welfare, or the justice system. Acknowledging such circumstances is a fundamental part of the family-focused approach; it is important to consider a person in the context of the family and community, and to look at the family as a unit.
- > Family members typically know each other best and they will be there through good times and bad—including long after incarceration and community supervision have ended.
- > Corrections professionals are not expected to understand all the behavioral dynamics of a family. Keep in mind that these factors may affect people when they go home. If the traditional family has had harmful or abusive interactions, remember to think of “family” broadly, to include other supportive members of a person's social network.

“Does a family-focused approach blur the boundaries between staff and people who are incarcerated?”

- > No. Adopting a strength-based, family-focused approach does not mean compromising professional boundaries. It means helping people identify their own strengths, resources, skills, and healthy patterns of behavior—as well as those positive qualities in their social networks.
- > This approach contributes to an atmosphere of mutual respect. It requires a willingness to see people in a broad context and to recognize the many roles they play, such as that of parents, neighbors, friends, and members of a congregation.

FROM INTAKE TO RELEASE: Using a Strength-Based, Family-Focused Approach

Corrections professionals in various positions and at all levels of management or administration can take steps to enhance their practice. Staff can apply strength-based, family-focused language, procedures, and programming in numerous ways, from intake through release. This section presents ideas you can adapt for your department or facility.

INTAKE AND NEEDS/RISK ASSESSMENT

A person's first contact with corrections staff is a key opportunity to use a different approach. Asking about strengths and family connections at intake can elicit information staff can use in making decisions about facility placement and program assignments. Strength-based language about the family can enhance risk and needs assessments. Learning about individuals' abilities and social supports, as well as their challenges and needs, can help staff develop more appropriate programming plans.

Asking about strengths and about family is valuable in other ways too. The act of asking these types of questions can build rapport by establishing a tone of mutual respect.¹²

The following checklist can gauge your facility's or agency's readiness to integrate a strength-based, family-focused approach during intake and needs/risk assessment.

Do your intake, assessment, and case management tools . . .

- obtain information about the strengths of families and other supportive people?
- use a broad definition of family that includes friends, extended family, and other significant people?
- ask people to identify resources in their social network, such as someone who can assist with a job search, provide temporary housing, or recommend local health services?
- emphasize the individual's strengths when developing plans for treatment, programming, and release?
- consider how age, gender, disability, and cultural factors play a role?
- ask about individuals' motivation? Encourage them to recognize and meet their responsibilities to their families?
- use open-ended questions to gather information?

Also:

- Are forms completed collaboratively through conversation, rather than by handing them to each individual?
- Do policies prioritize the placement of individuals at facilities that are close to their family?

Consider incorporating strength-based, family-focused language in

- > orientation manuals for new prisoners, parolees, and probationers,
- > intake and evaluation forms,
- > visitation manuals,
- > academy training for criminal justice professionals, and
- > job descriptions.

“While reducing and managing risk and addressing the incarcerated person’s needs may well be what is required for successful parole discharge, we need to build upon the incarcerated person’s strengths if we are to expect success in the community after parole supervision has been completed.”

—Dennis Schrantz, former deputy director, Policy and Strategic Planning, Michigan Department of Corrections

FROM INTAKE TO RELEASE: Using a Strength-Based, Family-Focused Approach

CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMMING

A strength-based, family-focused approach to correctional programming may improve people's well-being and increase their chance of success upon reentry.¹³

Use the checklist below to assess how well your programming focuses on strengths and social supports.

- Do in-service staff trainings and new-staff orientations address the role of family and social networks?
- Do programming compliance policies include strategies and methods that reinforce positive behavior (and not just punish negative behavior)?
- Does programming encourage individuals to identify and develop their talents and strengths?
- Do health-related programs involve family members (with appropriate consent) in the individual's care?

VISITATION

As discussed earlier, visitation and other communication during incarceration can have a positive effect on individuals and their loved ones. Correctional professionals and facilities can adopt policies and practices that reduce barriers to family contact and encourage supportive family involvement.

The checklist below identifies ways to enhance visitation policies and practices to effectively tap family support.

- Is contact with families and other important members of people's social networks built into their routines?
- Does the facility send information about visitation to family members and other supportive people?
- Is contact with family and other loved ones encouraged and supported, rather than used as leverage (such as by revoking privileges such as visits or phone calls)?
- Do visitation policies allow for contact with appropriate people outside the individual's immediate family, such as neighbors, friends, clergy, and community members?
- Is free or low-cost transportation to the facility available for visitors?

- Is video conferencing available to facilitate communication with loved ones who are far away or cannot visit?
- Are telephone fees reasonable so that individuals can make relatively frequent calls?
- In making staffing decisions for reception and visitation areas, are interpersonal skills considered (such as the ability to work well with families)?

REENTRY AND RELEASE PLANNING

The process of preparing people to return to the community may be the most important part of correctional case management. Effective planning takes into account factors such as stable housing, employment, health care, and addiction treatment. Families often provide or assist with these things. One prominent study found, for example, that individuals interviewed four to eight months after their release cited family support as the most important factor in helping them stay out of prison.¹⁴

Does release planning . . .

- begin early during a person's incarceration, and is it reassessed depending on individual and family circumstances?
- emphasize and build on the strengths of the individual?
- consider the context of the person's family and community and explore the resources available to everyone involved?
- involve supportive members of the family, broadly defined?
- encourage people to identify and connect with family members and community resources, rather than relying solely on government programs?
- involve policies and procedures for sharing relevant family-related information with community corrections professionals?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Addiction Technology & Transfer Center National Office, "Are Clients, Not Treatment Methods, the Key to Creating Lasting Behavior Change?" *The ATTC Networker* 7, 2 (2005): 10, 15.
- 2 With support from the National Institute of Corrections, the Relational Inquiry Tool was developed in partnership with state departments of corrections in Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and Oklahoma as well as the Safer Foundation in Chicago. See also M. diZerega and C. Shapiro, "Asking About Family Can Enhance Reentry," *Corrections Today* 69 no. 6 (2007): 58-61.
- 3 W. D. Bales and D. P. Mears, "Inmate Social Ties and the Transition to Society: Does Visitation Reduce Recidivism?" *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 45 no. 3 (2008): 287-321. (In this article, family was defined broadly, and the effect of visitation on desistance was similar for traditional and nontraditional family members).
- 4 J. R. Christian, "Riding the Bus: Barriers to Prison Visitation and Family Management Strategies," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21 no. 1 (2005): 31-48; see also J. R. Christian, J. B. Mellow, and S. Thomas, "Social and Economic Implications of Family Connections to Prisoners," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 34 (2006): 443-452.
- 5 N. G. La Vigne, C. Visher, and J. L. Castro, *Chicago Prisoners' Experiences Returning Home* (Research Brief) (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, 2004).
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- 13 S. Lawrence, D. P. Mears, G. Dubin, and J. Travis, *The Practice and Promise of Prison Programming* (Research Brief) (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, Justice Policy Center, 2002).
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For More Information...

The Family Justice Program provides extensive training and strategic support to government and community partners to help them effectively draw on the resources of families and communities. These systemic interventions are designed to benefit people at greatest risk of cycling in and out of the justice system.

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For more information, contact Margaret diZerega at mdizerega@vera.org or (212) 376-3082.