Keeping Families Intact: Creating Spaces for Families Impacted by Incarceration

For my graduate thesis in Museum Exhibition Planning & Design at University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania I asked the question: How can play experiences, modeled by children’s museums, but designed for prison visiting rooms, improve parent/child relationships and outcomes for families impacted by incarceration?

This question was inspired by an experience I had when I was working for the Hands On Children’s Museum in Olympia, Washington. While there, one of our community partners, Shelton Men’s Prison reached out to me to find out if the museum could collaborate with them on improving the children’s area inside their visiting room. I went out to the prison to see the space and as I was learning about the visiting program at this prison, the staff person I was talking to said that one of the goals of the prison visiting program was to keep families intact. It had never occurred to me that a prison visiting program and a children’s museum could share such an important goal.

To answer my thesis question, I started by speaking with colleagues who worked in children’s museums worked with families impacted by incarceration. In understanding why children’s museum might prioritize this particular group of people, I researched the effect that incarceration has on families.

In the 1970s, 140,000 people were incarcerated. Today, 2.2 million people are behind bars. The United States locks of more of its population than any other country in the world. This means that there are hundreds of thousands of families impacted by incarceration. In the United States, 1 in 28 children has an incarcerated parent. Having a parent who is incarcerated has a negative impact on a child’s life. Parental incarceration is an adverse childhood experience (ACE) and factors like this lead to negative outcomes for a child’s life. In fact, a child with an incarcerated parent is six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.

However, if a child is able to maintain a positive relationship with their parent during their parent’s incarceration, the possibility of negative outcomes is lessened. Also, a positive parent/child relationship can also result in a reduced rate of recidivism for parents and higher enrollment in positive programming offered by the prison.

For my project, I partnered with the Washington Corrections Center for Women (WCCW) to redesign the space inside their visiting room that is dedicated to families visiting with children. Through this partnership, I spoke with DOC staff, surveyed mothers at WCCW and was able to prototype my ideas in the space, with families. The survey results and analysis can be found in the appendix of my thesis, but a major takeaway was that the mother’s top priorities for the space were that it be fun and help strengthen relationships with their children.

Full documentation of the experiences I prototyped and the way I redesigned the space can be found in my thesis.
My takeaways from this project can be summed up in this way:

- **Be Flexible:** The priorities of prison do not necessarily align with the priorities of a children’s museum. Prisons are difficult to work with, you’ll have to adapt and work within a very different kind of system.
- **Find the Need:** Reaching out to non-profits or experts who are already working with families impacted by incarceration- they’ll help you figure out which need isn’t being covered and what could be the right fit for your institution.
- **Listen:** The most critical component of this project was communicating with mothers about what they need.

A PDF of my thesis can be found here: [https://tinyurl.com/y59ae8gb](https://tinyurl.com/y59ae8gb)

**Contact Info:**

Adrienne Testa  
[www.adriennetesta.com](http://www.adriennetesta.com)  
adrienne.testa@gmail.com  
845-258-8635