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Interactivity 2019: Beyond the Walls: Strengthening Family Relationships with Museum-Prison Partnerships

Our story began two years ago with a phone call from the Parenting Coordinator at the RI DOC who asked for our advice and ideas about ways to provide more structure, using play, during parent child visitation at the Men’s Medium facility. Given our work using play to help build and rebuild relationships with court separated parents and children (over the last 27 years), we knew this could be an opportunity to serve other families most in need of positive, shared experiences. As we thought about the supports the DOC might need, we knew we had to begin our process by understanding their needs, their system, and build a relationship with those who worked in this large, multi-layered state department.

We began with a series of meetings with the Parenting Coordinator to learn more about the challenges they were facing during the scheduled visitation time. We learned that it was difficult for the CO’s to monitor everyone’s safety and provide the level of required oversight during visitation since the kids often ran around the room – approximately 3000 square feet - moved from one activity to another, and were not always using their inside voices! In other words, they were being kids! It was difficult to imagine how we could help without observing the visits to understand how the children engaged with their parent and the parent with their child, and what toys and games were available to play with. There are numerous restrictions about the type of toys allowed in the visiting space which is and was a critical piece of information for us as we considered how to assist the staff with their initial question and goal.

After going through an approval process issued by the DOC, we were granted permission to attend a full day of visits in Men’s Medium, Men’s Minimum, and the Women’s Medium facilities.

As we walked through the security screening area, I was reminded of how delicate the visitation process can be. While it can be happy, playful, and reassuring, visitation can also be a time of sadness, anxiety and uncertainty. It can also remind a child of their last contact with their parent which can be difficult emotionally. I am glad to say that there was a lot of joy in the areas we visited and those we observed. Most of the children we saw were under the age of five with a few older youth attending. Here is a snapshot of a typical days’ visits throughout the three facilities: Men’s Medium – 110 fathers are signed up and approved to visit with their
children; currently, 81 fathers visit with 128 children. In Men’s minimum, 37 fathers are approved to participate in the visiting program with a total of 26 actively visiting with an average of 15 children visiting; and in the Women’s section, 19 women are approved to participate with 13 visiting with 20 children. Based on this information and our observations, we suggested Imagination Playground as an activity that could be used in all three visitation areas. We continue to work with the DOC to bring IP into the facilities once per month and offer a training on the benefits of using play-based activities to help the families build and rebuild their relationships. We have also offered to provide professional development classes or a class on the importance of play as it relates to healthy emotional development.

Developing a strong working relationship with the 1200 Correctional Officers is central to the success of this pilot. We have met with a union representative and described our goals to which he was receptive. He has connected us with the head of the CO’s union to discuss our project and our offer to bring IP to the Annual CO’s summer family picnic. It is our hope that bringing IP to their function, will help them quickly see how visiting children and their incarcerated parent will also enjoy it. It will also help them understand the Museum’s mission and focus on learning through play and the power play has in relationship building.

Here are a few of the successes we’ve had over the last two years:

- We have attended the Women’s Health Fair twice and are scheduled to attend the summer fair in July. We take IP, PCM information, and passes for the family members of the women.
- We will be invited to the Men’s Health Fair when a date is decided upon; we would also take IP, PCM information, and passes for their family members.
- Offering free admission for the CO’s and their families during CO week (May 5 through May 12)
- Are in the process of discussing memberships for the family members of the incarcerated individual. Working closely with the Parenting Coordinator and her supervisor on the system and plan.
- We have been invited to consult on a playground project in Men’s Minimum involving the Museum’s Exhibit Designer and Fabricator. This would be an exciting project!
- We have been asked to help the DOC procure additional supplies for the visitation sessions in all three facilities; they have a limited budget for items like glue sticks, felt, feathers, buttons, colored pencils, tissue paper and other materials that would encourage art-based projects. We are currently looking for donations for these materials. The materials I’ve mentioned have been suggested and requested by the parents and their children – nice to know they have a voice in this process.
- The Parenting Coordinator and her supervisor have welcomed the plan to bring IP to visitors and the incarcerated parents and are advocates and supporters of our ideas and suggestions.
Some challenges we’ve faced:

- The DOC is a multi-layered state system with numerous rules and personnel
- The Parenting Coordinator is overwhelmed with projects and daily responsibilities. She and her supervisor and one external partner (from a community agency) make up the department focusing on visitation and parenting support projects. Being flexible and patient has been and is necessary when working with this system.
- The community agency working with the DOC has been reluctant to embrace our ideas and involvement although we have made it clear that we are there to SUPPORT their work and not take over what they’ve accomplished over the last 15 years. We continue to emphasize our desire to support their amazing work.
- Change of leadership at the DOC has delayed projects and forward movement
- Access to the DOC has been limited due to challenges inside the prison resulting in lock downs and new restrictions for external partners.
- Some personnel do not favor or support enhanced visitation for the incarcerated individual.

In closing – to make a difference for all families, we must take risks and be FEARless! As Lois Silverman said in her book, The Social Work of Museums, Museums, in partnership with social workers and social service and community agencies, Museums are helping people cope and thrive in circumstances ranging from personal challenges to social injustices. Being a part of this project gives Providence Children’s Museum the chance to change lives and influence a different way to think about supporting vulnerable families. As we work on this project, I often hear the words of one of my mentors – we do this work because it’s the right thing to do!

Thank you