

# What I Learned Leading Fathering Groups for Federal Detainees

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**Abstract:** Leading a group for fathers in a federal detention facility can be transformative for the leader as well as the members of the group. The author describes his initial trepidations about working with this population, how the group began, the potential benefits to both the leader and the fathers, and how fathering is an equalizer.

**Keywords:** fathers; fathers' groups in prison; prison groups; prison programs; ambiguous loss; commonalities

I am a chicken. Not that there is anything wrong with wishing to avoid physical fights at all costs (this is a reframe), but I have always been more intrigued by running away rather than staying and battling it out. When my physical safety is not challenged, I am capable of a modest amount of professional courage. So when a judge telephoned me and asked if I knew of someone who was capable of starting a fathering program at the local federal holding facility (she knew I had a professional focus on fathers), I gulped, asked a few questions, paused a little longer, and volunteered myself.

As a chicken, I had a visceral fear for my physical safety and the safety of my family when I thought more about working in this high security facility. I was at war with myself because the social work side of my personality saw the professional challenge and the importance of trying to help fathers improve their parenting while incarcerated. I teach a full course load – advanced family therapy to second year MSW students and foundation practice with groups and families to first year students. This opportunity would put my areas of presumed expertise to the test in a way I had not been pushed in years. It would also give me “street cred” with students. I would be able to share with them on a current basis some of the challenges of running groups in prison and helping men from diverse backgrounds with family-related matters.

## Getting Started

The first step was to visit the urban facility, meet with the warden and staff, review the literature (Loper and Tuerk [2006; 2011] have written a great deal about mothers in prison, but little has been written about fathers, according to Mendez [2000]), and determine what group structure to recommend

for the fathering program. I always want an “out card” when I begin a relationship with an agency; with volunteer clinical commitments, I schedule them with a short-term contract so that if I feel uncomfortable or that it is not a good fit for the agency or me, I can honor the contract and then change course. In the past I have run parenting groups for a range of involuntary and voluntary populations from methadone maintenance participants (e.g., Greif & Drechsler, 1993) to parents in Baltimore schools (e.g., Greif & Morris-Compton, 2011). So I felt comfortable with the topic, just not the population and the setting. I did not know if I would be effective. We agreed I would co-lead a four-week group for 10 fathers for three separate cycles, and then evaluate the success of this approach after three months. I asked that a caseworker be in the room with me. A guard would be stationed outside the door. The caseworker who attended my initial meeting with the warden was assigned to the group. He sent out a flyer asking fathers who were interested in the program to contact him. Over 100 responded, enough to keep us busy for a year.

The caseworker had never run a group of this sort before. He is a tall African who has worked in the prison system for 25 years. He has a master's in international studies, an undergraduate philosophy degree, and is the father of a four-year-old. By nature a gentle man, he takes a strict tact with the detainees, but is also willing to go out of his way to help them with family related matters when his job permits it. The initial plan was that I would train him for three months in running the group and then he could go solo after I moved on.

## Countertransference

I teach about countertransference in all my courses.

I was trained by Salvador Minuchin in Structural Family Therapy in the 1970s while I was living in Philadelphia. He, along with Jay Haley, were the anti-countertransference gurus. Their notion was that the therapist takes charge of the sessions and does not reflect on his own internal processes. I have a strong appreciation though of how my feelings affect practice. I do an exercise in my family therapy class where students view a video of a family with the volume turned off. The students are asked to say if they like or dislike the family members and to guess what is going on in the family. With no information about the family, the students project onto the family their own feelings about a father who appears overbearing, a mother who appears passive, and a son who appears trapped in the middle. Those who want to rescue the child may see themselves in that position in their own family. This exercise gives students insight into themselves, what they may project onto families, and the importance of considering countertransference in their social work practice.

I was agitated before the first group. I lost sleep. My fantasy was that a detainee would slip me a note saying, "Leave \$10,000 at the McDonald's on Charles Street or I will have your house burned down." But the week before the first group convened, a friend who had worked in the prison framed it differently for me. "You will be like the minister or teacher who helps in the prison. They will treat you well," she reassured me.

### **The First Group**

The first group consisted of seven African Americans, one Latino, one white, and one Middle-Eastern father. They had been hand-picked by my co-leader from the large number who had responded to the flyer. He wanted the group to succeed and for me to have a positive initial experience. They were bright, articulate, and diverse in their backgrounds and reason for being detained. I received the list of names in advance, as did other facility officials who would review the list and ensure that members from rival gangs were not in the same group. The criminal charges were not included with the names that were circulated but, when the names were distinctive enough, I could do my own detective work on Google and get a sense for why they were in the facility. Crimes included drug dealing, armed robbery, extortion, money laundering, murder while

in prison, and immigration violations.

I quickly learned my initial fears for my safety were unfounded. As I taught my students when first starting a group, the leader can bring in notes about what to say to the group. The social worker does not have to memorize his opening remarks. As I began talking from my notes about the purpose of the group, its structure, my own history of working with groups, and the role of the social worker and the group in helping fathers make meaningful connections with family members, I became more comfortable. I focused on what I knew, not on what I did not know. I emphasized that we all have different approaches to parenting, that we come from different backgrounds, and that the group would provide a venue for the fathers to help each other.

The co-leaders would have ideas about parenting that we would share but that there would be a lot of wisdom among group members about how to be better fathers. I also talked about the socialization of men in our society, both as breadwinners with financial responsibility to provide for the family and as secondary caregivers who take a backseat to mothers when it comes to childrearing. This socialization makes it hard to feel worthy as a father if they can no longer provide financially while in prison. Finally, I stated that as a social worker, I was required to report any instances of child abuse that the men raised during the group. (Over the past 24 months, I have made only one report to DSS.)

During the first meeting, everyone in the group introduced themselves, described their parenting situations (e.g., some fathers had fathered numerous children by different women; others were married to one woman with whom they had one or two children), and stated what they wanted to get from the parenting group. As we went around the group, the Middle-Eastern man related that in his culture, as distinct from American culture, it was a significant "shame" on the family for a member to be in prison. His children who lived overseas with their mother did not know he was in prison and believed he was in the U.S. on business. "In that way, I am different from everyone else in the group." My co-leader then replied that it was also a greater stigma in his country of origin to be in prison than it was in U.S. culture. Even though the

other group members did not react, I wondered if the Americans would take offense at this, the implication to me being that criminality is an accepted part of U.S. culture. To myself, I interpreted the comment as the father's attempt to distance himself from the group.

While I could have zeroed in on how time in prison is viewed in different cultures, I reframed the discussion for the group into one of secrecy from children. "All of us have some things in our past we might want to keep secret from our children. In that way, we are all the same. It is only a matter of what we keep private." This led to a discussion about how to talk to children about personal histories of crime, which turned out to be a universal theme in future groups. In each subsequent group there have been fathers who either have not told their children they are being detained or have refrained from disclosing why they are detained.

Fathering is the great equalizer. While the specifics may vary, no matter where we live we struggle with connecting with our children and trying to raise them as well as we can. As the group progressed, the commonalities became more manifest as they stretched across generations and parenting issues. The second week of the first group, all the fathers except for one returned. He was in court. We focused on the fathers' upbringings and how the ways they were raised have affected how they parent. I brought in a large drawing of a genogram and described how the messages we received from our parents or the other adults who raised us get handed down to our children.

Many of the men were raised in loving families, and others saw little of their parents growing up. Grandparents were often involved in raising them. A few fathers described how at 12 or 13-years-old they turned to the streets for money or if school was no longer a good fit for them. A handful mentioned they had no idea how to be a father because they never had one. Some fathers grasped the learning behind the genogram quickly and talked about "breaking the cycle" of poor or inconsistent parenting.

The third week dealt with the fathers' relationships with the mother(s) of their children. While there were many loving and supportive descriptions of the

mothers, one father told the group his wife called him toxic, and said that he should stay away from the children. Others described the multiple relationships they were trying to balance with different women involved in raising their children. One man, who looked to be in his mid-20s, opened up an issue that many men in the group must have had at least considered. "I worry that my girlfriend is not going to wait for me if I go away for a long time. And then I won't have contact with my kids if she moves on."

"Yikes! How do I handle this vitally important issue?" I wondered. My projection was that he was correct and she probably would not wait for 10 years, especially if she had other options. One of the advantages of groups, especially by the time the group has met for a few sessions, is that some group cohesion has formed and other members may jump in. As I was about to ask, "Does anyone else have this concern?" another member jumped in and said, "There's nothing you can do about that, man. You got to do what you got to do." Then he said something to the effect of that, whatever happens with his girlfriend, he has to remain committed to his children.

Other members chimed in about the importance of commitment to the children regardless of what happens with the mother. A few said they did not have concerns about their wives or girlfriends being there when they came out, though I suspected they did harbor such fears also. This theme, will she wait for me, has recurred in subsequent groups and asking the men how such a loss would affect their relationship with their children, should a breakup occur, is one way of acknowledging the fear while refocusing on the father-child relationship.

The fourth and final week centered on specific questions they had about childrearing. Given the range of the ages of children, infants to young adults, we did not provide specific child development lectures. This was more a discussion and support group.

One of the older men in the group, someone in his 40s who had been in and out of prison, raised a concern about his daughter. "She is getting to be 14 and is feeling her oats. You know what I mean? And there are a lot of guys on the corner who are

interested. I was one of those guys once, so I know what's up." One man responded, "It is your job as a father to talk to her." Another man said, "It is the mother's responsibility to talk to her." After a few other comments were made by the same three men, I said it raises the issue for everyone in the group about what influence men currently have on their children. I also said that while fathers are often told about their role with their sons, their role with their daughters can be as important. It is from fathers, I said, that daughters may learn how other men in their lives should treat them.

Some fathers in the group believed they had a lot of influence on their children while being detained and reported they spoke to their children every day. Others believed they had little influence now that they were in prison. While this particular group did not discuss the influence that fathers have on sons, men in subsequent groups have talked about the importance of having a man (father, older brother, uncle) around when they were young and felt their sons needed their presence now.

The final session also included a mini-graduation where they received a Certificate of Completion for their attendance in the group. Some men hoped to use this Certificate to improve their chances when it came to their court appearance.

My fears dissipated during the course of these first meetings. I began to view these men as fathers and not as detainees. Seeing them in this light allowed me to interact with them as men in need of parenting assistance and not as people to fear. I also saw their struggles as not that different from my own struggles as a father and grandfather. I probably came across with the first groups of fathers as overly deferential and not as helpful with information as I might have been: I was so concerned with all the ways I was working across culture; I feared pushing the men in a way that might be harmful to me and to them; I worried that if the men were too open or cried in response to my questioning it would make them look weak to other men in prison.

Because of my concerns I overlooked our commonalities and the information that I could offer while still being respectful of cultural differences and boundaries. After some months though, I

became a social worker. I gently pushed and probed. I asked permission to make a suggestion. I thanked the men for sharing their feelings and assured them they were expressing pain that others felt, too. And nothing bad happened.

### **Since the First Group**

The first group was intended for me to get some experience and comfort with the population, to gather preliminary data about what was needed for the next groups, and to explore whether the structure and topics for each group session (pre-selected by me) made sense. My co-leader and I were unsure about the success of the group (despite good feedback on evaluation forms) and asked one of the more vocal and insightful fathers from the first group if he wanted to help us co-lead the next group. He was thrilled to be asked (it was a diversion from being on his prison block, and it could potentially help his court case). He proved helpful in explaining to the next 10 fathers how the group could be beneficial. At the end of the second group, we approached another internal leader from that group and he agreed to assist us with the third group. By the end of the third group cycle, I felt comfortable enough to co-lead the group without a previous group member serving as indigenous leader. I also agreed to extend my contract with the facility for at least six more months.

As it turns out, the structure that we attempted in the first group with an introductory session followed by sessions on family history, relationships with mothers of the children, and resolving specific issues, has been adopted for subsequent groups. But what happens in the group has been tweaked. I now start off talking about our past work with 200 fathers. I have confidence about what I am doing and am willing to draw on my experience with this population to be more directive. I read statements at the first meeting about what fathers have said in previous groups so that the fathers are immediately oriented to the potential content of the group.

Through my own thinking I have added the lens of ambiguous loss as one way to conceptualize what these fathers experience. In Pauline Boss' (2006; 2010) work, ambiguous loss originally referred to losses that cannot be easily resolved, because a person is missing and a body has not been found. While the concept first focused on physical absence

but psychological presence (someone who is missing due to kidnapping or war can remain “present” in their loved ones' lives through being remembered), ambiguous loss has come to include someone being physically present and psychologically absent (a person, for example, who lives with an addiction or has Alzheimer's disease). In talking about the fathers' upbringing, men may have had absent fathers or fathers who were in the house but not psychologically available to them because of long work hours, emotional distance, or substance abuse. The message I try to convey is that while the fathers in the group are physically absent, they can still be psychologically present. This message cuts across all age groups of father and child and offers hope for a parent-child relationship.

I like doing the group and have continued to run it on a volunteer basis for two years with no plans to stop. My co-leader has improved his group leadership skills. The issues that are raised can be extremely complicated. Re-focusing an angry father on what he can accomplish in prison rather than what he cannot accomplish can be difficult. Some four week groups never become particularly cohesive. Other groups can have members who are regressed in their view of children and women and lead the group into unproductive discussions. Sometimes the group takes on a locker room atmosphere that could sound objectifying of women. Occasionally I have felt like a middle school teacher unable to control his class as I try to re-focus them on the topic.

Stylistically I am more assertive and speak more authoritatively about parenting by referencing past groups. “I am not sure this will work for you, but fathers in other groups have found this helpful,” is a common way for me to offer guidance. Dealing with anger in the group is not difficult for me as I have learned how to gauge members' reactions. When fathers express anger at their situation or the “system,” I usually ask them to tell the group more about what they are feeling rather than attempt to redirect them.

Only occasionally do I try and divert a group member from angry expressions if I feel he is too agitated. One example was a member of a gang who had just been sentenced to 20 years in prison

and was waiting to be sent to another facility. He had appeared to me to be the most agitated in earlier groups. In our final group he said, “I have just been sentenced to 20 years so I don't have a lot of hope of seeing my child until she's an adult, if I see her then.” I worried this man might feel he had little to lose if he became explosive in the group. I asked him to tell us more, rather than try to shut him down, and to draw on past experiences of successful coping. I wanted to know from whom he derived this strength in raising his children. It gave him a platform and also redirected him.

Occasionally men cry in the group. This typically happens with men who are illegal immigrants and are at risk for being deported. One man, whose family was in Maryland illegally, cried openly during the first session as he described his love for his children and his fear that he would not see them if he was sent back to his home country. “It costs too much for them to visit me if I go back, and then they might not be able to come back here,” he explained. “That's hard,” was all I had to offer. I am aware that sometimes members in the group and the group as a whole have to sit with painful feelings. At the end of that group, I thanked him for expressing feelings and reiterated that separation from children can be difficult.

While crying occurs occasionally, more typical is the young man who reports, “I never had a father in my life, and I am hoping this group will teach me how to be a father.” Sometimes older men in the group, who may be grandfathers, will offer specific advice immediately or during later groups. The advice usually is, “Be there for your kids,” “Take responsibility for yourself,” and “Turn to God for help.”

At the third group session, I now give out a list of parenting tips that cut across the age of the child. These include: stay in consistent contact; tell your child you love him/her; and be aware that parent-child relationships can change for the better over time. Some fathers want to take something concrete from the sessions that they can review on their own. When I first began the group, I had no idea what advice to give beyond the generic. Now I can anticipate with a fair degree of accuracy what might come up in the group and am prepared with possible suggestions.

### **Social Change**

When the group first started, those who completed the group did not receive any special visitation privileges. At the end of the third group as I was asking for feedback, one detainee said they should be allowed a contact visit with their children. Up to that point, all visitations occurred with a glass barrier between the detainee and his visitors. The structure, built in the 1980s to house maximum security prisoners, has no gathering place where physical contact can occur. I advocated for, and the warden agreed to, this change in visitation policy as an incentive for completing the group and to help the fathers connect more meaningfully with their children. The only spaces available for contact visits are small rooms where lawyers meet with clients during the week. Those 24-square-foot rooms are now where the visitations take place on the weekend for fathers who complete the group and who are not facing child abuse-related charges. Fathers from the first three groups were granted the contact visits retroactively.

At the end of a recent group, when I again asked what should change for future groups, one father said it is inconsistent that we promote family togetherness in the group discussions but do not allow the whole family to be together for the contact visit – the contact visits are just with the children. I believe this was a relevant suggestion, and again approached the warden about this. He politely rebuffed the suggestion saying that there was no space for such meetings as there is in other facilities. Leavenworth, for example, has sufficient space and a policy that allows five visitors at one time, up to three of whom can be adults (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). The room where the fathers' group is held is similar to a small classroom and could not accommodate more than two families (close to 400 detainees are staying in this facility). Other deterrents have also been cited. First, the prison is extremely concerned with contraband being passed into the prison, even after visitors, myself included, pass through a metal detector and are frisked. Second, not enough staff is available to monitor the program. Third, as a holding facility and as compared with a prison like Leavenworth, the time spent is shorter and the need for on-going visitation less acute.

I do not see what more can be done given the setting, its architectural layout, and the staffing issues. In fact, not only is the group room meeting space small, it also houses six single cells. Occasionally guards will bring a detainee into the room during the group and place them in a contiguous cell where the detainee can overhear the group. During one meeting, one of those being held in the cell was screaming and was so disruptive to the group that one of the members shouted at him to be quiet.

I am also aware of not pushing my co-leader, the prison caseworker, beyond his own comfort level and of not getting triangulated between the detainees' requests, their complaints in the group about the facility's policies, and the caseworker. Yet, now that I have entered this environment, I wonder more broadly what can be done in a system that is so highly regulated and, while costly on a state and federal level, is underfunded in terms of services. I wonder what can be done specifically for these fathers in this particular detention facility. Personal relationships remain the best avenue to pursue change where it is possible and, unless I am effective with the detainees, I lose purchase with my co-leader, the warden, and the judge who first approached me. The clinician in me says to focus on helping a few fathers at a time while trying to impact the broader context of the community in which I am volunteering.

### **Conclusion**

Whatever has caused these men to enter the facility, fathering, as stated, is the great equalizer. Behavior or status in the community is washed away when men start talking about their feelings for their children. Some who attend are willing to actively engage each other by listening and suggesting avenues for more adaptive behavior. The group provides the opportunity for the men to be something other than detainees – they are fathers. They possess a different identity when they attend the group. For the 75 minutes we are together, they can describe themselves as loving and caring if they are willing to embrace that persona.

With each group, I feel more comfortable and have learned that the more I offer, the more they and I get from the experience. A few fathers state they would rather hear from me than the group members as I

have the most education. This is not true for all groups. Sometimes I sense it does not matter what I say, they are only biding their time for their contact visit.

Four weeks is hardly enough time to encourage significant change in fathering and family patterns. Hobler (2001) describes a group that was effective for fathers that met four times a week for 12 weeks. If I co-lead a longer group, it would forestall other fathers from having the benefit of the group and the contact visit with their children that is the high point for them.

By each group's conclusion, it is hard to know what has changed for the members. There is little incentive in giving a negative evaluation on the anonymous forms they complete at the end of the group. When they speak about their parenting experiences and what they have learned, it is impossible to know if what they are reporting is accurate or if they are telling us what they think we want to hear. Yet, I always hold on to the belief that if a father can pretend to say the right thing, even if he doesn't act on it, he is on his way.

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