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Visiting Mom: A pilot evaluation of a prison-based visiting program serving incarcerated mothers and their minor children

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Abstract

We describe an evaluation of a prison visiting program, Extended Visiting (EV), for incarcerated mothers and their children. Mothers ($N=24$) and caregivers ($N=19$) were interviewed regarding experiences with the program. Mothers identified benefits including maintaining a relationship with children, physical contact, motivation, privacy, peer support, and personal growth. Caregivers echoed mothers' appreciation for the opportunity to maintain mother-child relationships and physical contact. Mothers identified barriers including desire for overnight visits and more age-appropriate activities. Caregivers perceived travel time and costs and children's adverse reactions as barriers. When comparing EV to typical visiting, participants unanimously preferred EV.

Keywords

children of incarcerated parents; visitation; program evaluation; qualitative research; parenting

The United States (US) has incarcerated a rapidly increasing number of individuals in recent years, with the number of adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons more than tripling between 1980 & 2000 (Beck & Gillard, 1995; West & Sabol, 2008). This unprecedented mass incarceration of men and women has left approximately 1.7 million children in the US with at least one parent currently in prison (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). In addition, millions more have a parent serving time in local jails (Kemper & Rivara, 1993; Western & Wildeman, 2009).

The current study sought to understand an innovative prison-visiting program designed to help children and mothers maintain their relationship throughout the mother's incarceration. This enhanced visitation program allows mothers and children to enjoy longer visits that are more structured and child-oriented than a typical prison-visiting experience. The aims of the current study included describing participants' perceptions of benefits and barriers to their participation in the enhanced visitation program as well as comparing participants'

experiences in the program to their experiences in more typical prison-visiting environments.

Literature Review

Unique Issues Surrounding Maternal Incarceration

Female incarceration is growing at a rate far outpacing the growth in male incarceration, with the number of incarcerated women more than doubling between 1991 & 2007 (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). The majority of incarcerated women (61%) are mothers of minor children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008) and women in both state and federal prisons are more likely than men to be parents of minor children (Mumola, 2000). While these numbers represent our best approximation of the number of incarcerated mothers, it is likely an underestimation as parenting status of inmates is inconsistently recorded in part due to correctional authorities' belief that the parental status of inmates is not in the facility's purview, as well as inmates' unwillingness to disclose information for child protection concerns (Maruschak et al., 2010).

For a variety of reasons, many scholars have suggested that maternal incarceration may have particularly deleterious effects on children (Dallaire, Zeman, & Trash, 2014; Murray & Farrington, 2008). In a longitudinal study investigating the unique effects of maternal incarceration on child outcomes, children who experienced their mother's incarceration were more likely than children without a history of maternal incarceration to be convicted of a crime in adulthood (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). In this sample, over a quarter (26%) of children who experienced the incarceration of their mother during childhood were convicted of crimes as adults, compared to only 10% of their peers who did not experience the incarceration of their mother (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Other scholars have noted that incarcerated mothers are more likely to have mental health problems than incarcerated fathers (James & Glaze, 2006). Maternal mental health problems are particularly concerning when we consider, for instance, research linking maternal depression and child internalizing, externalizing, negative affect, and general psychopathology (Goodman, Rouse, Connell, Robbins Broth, Hall, & Heyward, 2010).

Mothers are more likely than fathers to serve as primary caregivers of their children, which may explain why maternal incarceration is often associated with especially unfavorable outcomes. Most incarcerated mothers (75%) reported serving as the primary caregiver of their children prior to incarceration, while only a quarter of fathers did (Maruschak et al., 2010), and many of those mothers will return to parenting upon release. In addition, even in cases of father involvement, mothers were more likely than fathers to be responsible for the day-to-day care of their children (Maruschak et al., 2010). In part because the children are simply with their mothers more often, children whose mothers have been incarcerated are more likely to have witnessed their parent's criminal activity than children with an incarcerated father (Dallaire, 2007). These traumatic events associated with a mother's arrest and incarceration (e.g., witnessing criminal activity in the home, witnessing a mother's arrest, being cared for by a new caregiver) have been linked to increased internalizing and externalizing symptomatology (Dallaire, Zeman, & Trash, 2014). Further, the experience of these incarceration-specific risks predicted children's psychological maladaptation above

and beyond children's experiences with more general environmental risks (e.g., low maternal education, maternal parenting beliefs; Dallaire et al., 2014).

Children of incarcerated parents will likely encounter fewer adverse outcomes if they receive stable, high-quality caregiving during the parent's incarceration (Poehlmann, 2005b). A child whose mother served as his primary caregiver prior to the mother's incarceration necessarily experiences instability and at least one disruption in his caregiving environment as he is transitioned from the mother's care to the care of some other individual. Further, incarcerated mothers are nearly three times as likely to have headed a single parent household prior to their incarceration than incarcerated fathers (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010). Thus, a child of an incarcerated mother would be more likely to move residences than a child of an incarcerated father. In many cases, when a father is incarcerated, the child is able to remain in the home they resided in before the arrest as the mother remains in the home to care for the children. Therefore, children of incarcerated mothers are at increased risk for disrupted attachment relationships compared to those of incarcerated fathers (Dallaire, 2007; Murray & Murray, 2010). Indeed, children of incarcerated mothers are five times more likely than those of incarcerated fathers to be placed in foster care while their parent is incarcerated (Maruschak, Glaze, & Mumola, 2010).

Pregnancy is another issue that is unique to incarcerated mothers. It is estimated that between 6% to 10% of incarcerated women are pregnant at the time of arrest (Clark et al., 2006). Many of these women give birth in custody and will be separated from their infants shortly after birth. Their infants face unique challenges in terms of forming an attachment relationship. Considering that most incarcerated mothers plan to resume caregiving once released, promoting positive mother-infant interaction during incarceration is essential for successful reentry and secure attachment relationship between mother and child following the mother's incarceration.

Visiting Incarcerated Mothers

Because of the unique needs of incarcerated mothers and their children, it is particularly critical to facilitate positive mother-child visitation experiences. There is evidence that more frequent contact between incarcerated mothers and their children can help mitigate negative mother and child outcomes, particularly when the quality of the contact is high. In one study, mothers in prison who had frequent contact with their children were less likely to report low self-esteem compared with mothers with no contact (Thompson & Harm, 2000). Further, it was only those mothers who received frequent visits from their children who benefitted from participation in a parenting intervention (Thompson & Harm, 2000). Similar benefits are reported in others samples, including less depression in mothers who experience frequent visitation (Poehlmann, 2005a) and lower levels of depression, anxiety, and somatization in mothers who had sustained contact with their children (Houck & Loper, 2002). Finally, mothers who had contact with their children reported lower levels of parenting stress, including stress specific to their child visiting them in prison, and fewer depressive symptoms (Loper, Carlson, Levitt, & Scheffel, 2009).

In addition to these benefits for mothers, there is some research indicating that children also benefit from contact with their incarcerated mothers. Children participating in an enhanced prison-visitation program with their mothers, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, exhibited decreased problem behaviors at home (Block & Potthast, 1998). Adolescents with frequent contact with their incarcerated mothers, including in-person visitation, were less likely to drop out of school or be suspended than those who did not have regular contact (Trice & Brewster, 2004)

Visitation between incarcerated mothers and their children, however, is not always associated with positive outcomes. Many incarcerated mothers report mixed feelings regarding visitation with their children, describing visits as “uncertain,” “bittersweet,” and “overwhelming” (Arditti & Few, 2008). The limited physical contact permitted with most in-person visitation can be acutely painful for both mothers and their children (e.g., Allen, Flaherty, & Ely, 2010). Mothers, in particular, tend to be sensitive to children’s potential distress during visitation, thereby increasing their own feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and shame (e.g., Loper et al., 2009). The limited time allowed in typical visitation can also be upsetting, with many mothers reporting that visits are too short to connect with their children on an emotional level (Arditti & Few, 2006). In a sample of both incarcerated mothers and fathers, children who visited their parents more frequently showed more indications of attachment insecurity than children who visited less frequently (Dallaire, Wilson, & Ciccone, 2009). Some children exhibited increased behavioral issues both before and after visits (Poehlmann, Shlafer, & Maes 2006), as well as attention problems in school (Dallaire, Wilson, & Ciccone 2010). Given these inconsistencies in reported outcomes surrounding visitation, more research regarding these issues is warranted.

One reason for the mixed literature regarding outcomes associated with visitation is that few researchers have examined the *quality* of visitation experiences. The limited work assessing visiting quality indicates that this is indeed an important factor to consider when considering outcomes. A recent literature review indicated that it is only those studies examining *enhanced* visitation programs of some type (e.g., longer duration visits, visits in conjunction with parenting classes) that show benefits for both mothers and children (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper, & Shear, 2010). In reports demonstrating increased attachment insecurity following visits (e.g., Dallaire, Wilson, & Ciccone, 2009), the context of visiting and the resultant visit quality are important considerations. Dallaire and colleagues interpreted the positive association between visit frequency and insecure attachment representations as indicating that this particular type of visiting (non-contact, Plexiglas visits) was stressful for children (Dallaire, Wilson, & Ciccone, 2009).

The enhanced visitation programs that are associated with positive outcomes differ in many ways from typical visiting, eliminating many aspects of visiting that inhibit positive experiences. One particularly salient barrier of typical visiting is the emotional difficulty of non-contact visiting (e.g., behind a glass partition). This difficulty is especially pronounced in visits with small children, leading some mothers to forgo visits entirely, as visiting without being allowed to express physical affection is too painful for mothers and children (Allen et al., 2010).

Corrections environments are often loud, sterile, and not designed with children in mind, causing fear in some children visiting their incarcerated parents (Murray, 2007; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Other negative aspects associated with visiting include sometimes alarming security procedures (e.g., the use of metal detectors, physical pat-downs) and a sterile, uncomfortable visiting room space. These features can make for an unpleasant and frightening visiting experience, especially from a child's perspective (Arditti, 2003; Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2005). Few visiting areas are welcoming for children, lacking color or pictures on the walls and most lacking toys, books, or other activities for children. Many incarcerated mothers feel distress at their children's discomfort in prison and restrictions on physical affection, limiting the positive connection they are able to have with their children during visitation (Arditti & Few, 2008). Policies surrounding physical contact between inmates and visitors can vary dramatically across facilities, but the majority are characterized by limited, unnatural physical contact, such as a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek. Telling a child that they are not allowed to touch their incarcerated parent is likely confusing and difficult, especially for younger children. One way to enhance and support children's experiences is by allowing physical contact between mothers and children.

Another way to enhance the visitation experience for mothers and children is to make the physical visiting environment less frightening from a child's perspective. The typical prison visiting room is sterile and institutional in appearance. The simple addition of color or pictures on the walls would make the space more welcoming to children. In addition to its institutional appearance, many other inmates and their visitors often occupy the visiting room at the same time, creating a noisy and potentially overwhelming scenario for children. A child seated across from his or her parent may have difficulty hearing or focusing on what their parent is saying. Typical visiting involves the child being in close proximity to other inmates, which can be frightening and anxiety-provoking, especially if the child knows that these individuals have committed crimes. Visit quality would likely be improved by allowing visitation in a more welcoming, child-friendly environment allowing for more privacy between mothers and children.

Provision of activities is another factor that could improve visit quality. Typical visiting consists of conversation between the inmate and visitors, devoid of any additional structured activity. While an hour-long conversation may be appropriate for adults, this format is developmentally inappropriate for children. Most young children are unable to maintain their attention and regulate their behavior for long enough to sit and quietly talk with their parent for that duration. Providing child-friendly materials, like books, toys, or games, would give children and parents a more enjoyable and natural way to engage with one another during their visits.

Lastly, lengthening the time children have to visit with their mothers may improve visit quality. Researchers have shown that alternative modes of communication (i.e., letters) are less stressful for children due to the temporal and emotional distance leading to less emotionally reactive responses from both parties (Tuerk & Loper, 2006). While lengthening visiting time doesn't separate the visitors in time and space, it does allow for more time to get past initial reactions. Second, lengthening the time mothers and children are able to spend together may make the long, expensive travel to the prison feel more worthwhile,

especially for caregivers. Families of incarcerated women are particularly susceptible to long travel times, as there are fewer women's facilities than men's in each state. As was the case in the current study, women were incarcerated the state's only women's prison, resulting in particularly long travel times from their residences pre-incarceration.

The current study represents a pilot evaluation of a unique enhanced visiting program for incarcerated mothers and their children. This program incorporates many of the suggestions for improving the quality of in-person visitation discussed above, including permitting physical contact between mothers and children, creating a child-oriented visiting environment by modifying the location and structure of visits, and providing more time for mother and child interaction. We know of the barriers to high quality visitation in traditional prison visiting in large part by investigating participants' perspectives on their experiences. Thus, understanding how participants perceive this enhanced visiting environment is critical to our evaluation of the program, particularly as these experiences compare to their experiences with traditional visiting.

The Extended Visiting Program

The Extended Visiting (EV) program serves mothers at a women's prison in one Midwest state and their minor children (infancy to age 17). Through EV, mothers and children are able to participate in highly structured, extended length, child-centered visits at the prison. The purpose of EV, defined by the state's Department of Corrections (DOC) is: *"To provide offenders participating in parenting programs additional visiting privileges in order to build and/or maintain a nurturing relationship with their own children during the extended visits."*

Extended visits occur on Saturday afternoons, lasting approximately four hours. Children are split into two age groups: younger (infants to 9 years old) and older (10 to 17 years old). One weekend per month is reserved for the older children, while the younger children are eligible to visit on the other weekends. Extended visits between mothers and children in both age groups occur outside of the typical visiting room, in the Children's Room in the prison's core building and the gymnasium. The visit is highly structured, including time for lunch, play in the gym, and weekly activities (e.g., arts and crafts, group games) organized by participating mothers. Mothers and children in both age groups are allowed to express natural physical affection with one another throughout the visit including hugging, hand-holding, and children sitting on their mothers' laps. Because of facility concerns with security, physical space constraints, and a desire to keep the focus on parenting (as opposed to co-parenting, for example), caregivers do not directly participate in these visits. Caregivers do, however, play a vital indirect role by arranging the visit and transporting the child to and from the prison.

The EV program is not available to all women at the prison, but only those mothers residing in a privileged living unit that has a specific focus on parenting. This unit houses women who have met specific eligibility criteria including residence at the facility for at least 60 days and demonstrating exemplary behavior during their incarceration. Women who meet criteria for residency in this privileged unit must then submit a formal application for residency and participation in the parenting program. In addition to meeting eligibility criteria, women, their children, and their children's caregivers must adhere to the DOC's

policies regarding pre-visit approval of visitors by corrections staff, the drop off and pick up of children, appropriate attire, physical contact, and healthcare for visiting children (if applicable).

Mothers incarcerated at this facility, but not housed in the privileged parenting unit, visit with their children and other loved ones in the formal visiting room. These visits (henceforth referred to as “typical visits”) last approximately one hour and differ from visits offered through the EV program in several important ways. Compared to typical visiting, EV differs on four key characteristics: permissible physical contact, location, structure, and length (see Table 1).

Despite promising anecdotal reports from mothers and children regarding their participation in EV, to date, the facility has been unable to formally evaluate the existing EV program. A formal and systematic assessment of the benefits and barriers of participation in EV is needed to make informed suggestions on program improvement, as well as expansion within this prison and other correctional facilities across the country. In addition to informing facility-specific policies, an evaluation of this unique approach to enhanced prison visitation may allow administrators and researchers to draw careful inferences regarding programs at other facilities.

The current study grew from the desire of the prison staff to know more about participants’ perceptions of the benefits and barriers to participation in the EV program. The evaluation was conducted by a local University’s research group, in active collaboration with prison staff. Of special importance was the collaboration with the coordinator of the parenting program in the parenting unit at the prison. The study’s three research aims are described below.

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of EV participants, including incarcerated mothers, their children, and their children’s caregivers, and average visit frequency.
2. Describe mothers’ and caregivers’ perceptions of the benefits and barriers to their participation in EV and potential areas for program improvement.
3. Compare participants’ experiences with EV to their experiences with typical visits.

Methods

Participants

Mothers living in the privileged living unit of the prison, who had participated in EV with at least one of their minor children, were eligible to participate in the current study. The caregivers of these mothers’ children were also eligible to participate in the study. The final sample included 24 mothers and 19 caregivers. All mothers who were eligible to participate in EV and who had received at least one extended visit at the time of the study participated in the current study. Two of the participating caregivers were members of the same family, jointly providing care for a single mother’s child[ren]. Of the six caregivers who did not participate, three were not contacted by request of the mother, one declined to participate

when contacted, and two could not be reached despite several attempts. No information was available on the mothers in the unit who chose not to participate. Descriptive characteristics of mothers and caregivers are considered in the *Results* section of this manuscript.

Procedure

Mothers were recruited with the help of the Parenting Program Coordinator. She introduced the research opportunity to women in the unit and scheduled interested women for an individual interview with University research staff. Following informed consent of the incarcerated mother, the interviews were conducted at the prison in the living unit where no other inmates were present and prison staff were out of earshot. During the interview, research staff followed a semi-structured interview script including questions regarding mothers' experiences with EV, perceived benefits and barriers to participation in the program, overall satisfaction with the program, and any suggestions for program improvement. Mothers were also asked to provide basic demographic information about themselves and their children (e.g., level of education, number of children, children's ages). Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Prior to conducting the interview, research staff obtained written, informed consent, taking particular caution to explain that mothers' participation, or lack thereof, would not affect their relationships with the University or the state's Department of Corrections.

The Parenting Program Coordinator provided research staff with their children's caregivers' contact information. Research staff then recruited caregivers, obtained informed consent, and conducted interviews over the telephone. As caregivers do not participate directly in EV, but instead participate indirectly (e.g., transporting the child to and from prison, financially supporting the visits, communicating with the incarcerated parent), caregivers were asked to reflect on their experiences in this regard. Caregivers also provided information about the children's behavior before and after visits. This information was particularly important to obtain from caregivers, as only they witnessed the children's behavior outside of visitation.

Quantitative & Qualitative Analysis

We first examined descriptive statistics for key quantitative variables (e.g., frequency of visitation, mother and child characteristics). Mothers and caregivers provided their thoughts about, and experiences with, EV in response to several open-ended interview questions. These qualitative data were coded using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2012), with a focus on understanding mothers' and caregivers' subjective experience with EV and with other, non-enhanced visiting at the facility. A team of three independent coders systematically analyzed responses and grouped the ideas expressed in participants' answers according to qualitative themes. Following their independent grouping of responses according to theme, these coders came together to compare the thematic groupings each had identified and their assignment of individual responses to each theme. Where there was disagreement, coders discussed the themes until consensus was reached. Lastly, we compared mothers' and caregivers' experiences with EV to their experiences with typical visiting by analyzing qualitative descriptions of the differences in these experiences and comparing quantitative satisfaction ratings of both types of visiting.

Results

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants and Visiting Frequency

Participating mothers ranged in age from 26.4 to 54.4 years old, with an average age of 38.1 years old ($SD = 7.3$ years). Mothers were primarily Caucasian (18 women; 75%), while some were Native American (2, 8.3%), some African American (3; 12.5%), and one described herself as multiracial (4.2%). Women's educational status ranged from some high school to completing a post-graduate degree (M.A., Ph.D., MD), with most women in the sample completing some college (14; 58.3%). Of the four women who reported having GEDs, three of them obtained that GED while incarcerated. The majority of women (11; 45.8%) were never married, six women (25%) were divorced, three (12.5%) were married, another three (12.5%) were partnered but not married, and one woman (4.2%) was widowed. Most women (15; 62.5%) reported earning less than \$25,000 in the year prior to their incarceration.

Mothers had an average of 3.1 ($SD = 1.5$) children (Range = 1–7). In total, mothers had 148 children between them. When a mother had more than one minor child that had participated in EV, researchers chose one child at random as the subject of the interview (henceforth referred to as the “target child”). Target children ranged in age from 4.1 months old to 17.4 years old, with an average age of 10.2 years old ($SD = 5.3$ years). Equal numbers of male (12; 50%) and female children were randomly selected as target children. Children were more racially diverse than their mothers; 14 (58.3%) were Caucasian, seven (29.2%) were multiracial, two (8.3%) were African American, and one (4.2%) was Native American. The majority (87.5%; 21 of 24) of target children were currently enrolled in school (preschool through 11th grade). The remaining three children were too young to be enrolled in formal schooling. The vast majority (82.6%; 19 of 23 children for whom these data were supplied) of target children lived with their mothers prior to their mother's incarceration. Target children had experienced anywhere from zero to eight moves since their mother was first incarcerated for her current sentence, with an average of 1.4 moves ($SD = 1.7$).

Caregivers were those individuals who were providing care for the incarcerated women's children while they served their sentences. Caregivers had various relationships to the children including grandparent (42%), father (21%), other relative (21%), family friend (5%), and unspecified other relationships (11%). Nearly three quarters (14; 73.7%) of caregivers were female. Caregivers ranged in age from 37.08 to 68.6 years old, with an average age of 52.9 years old ($SD = 8.7$ years). The majority (15; 78.9%) of caregivers were Caucasian, one (5.3%) was Native American, and three (15.8%) were African American. Caregivers reported providing care to an average of 2.2 ($SD = 1.4$) children, with each caregiver providing care for between one and six children. Over one third (7; 36.4%) of caregivers were also caring for one or more siblings of the target child. More than half (11; 57.9%) of caregivers were the only adult living in their household. Of the remaining eight caregivers living with other adults, six of those other adults were spouses of the caregiver, whereas two were adults that nevertheless required care (i.e., an 18 year old child of the caregiver and an elderly parent). Most (13; 54.2%) caregivers reported a current annual income below \$50,000.

Next, mothers reported how often on average, they received visits from their children. Three women (12.5%) reported that their children visited every week; two (8.3%) reported visited occurring twice or three times per month; fourteen mothers (58.3%) had visits that averaged once per month; four mothers (16.7%) reported their children visited every other month; and one mother (4.2%) was visited an average of three to five times per year. Women rated their satisfaction with how often they saw their children on a 7-point scale from *extremely unsatisfied* (1) to *extremely satisfied* (7). Women reported an average satisfaction score of 5.3 ($SD = 1.5$, Range: 2 – 7).

Perceptions of Benefits and Barriers to Participation

The following section describes themes identified in qualitative coding of participants' answers to the open-ended interview questions, with the most frequent responses listed first.

Mothers' perspectives of benefits—Mothers identified the following benefits to participation in EV: the opportunity to build and maintain a relationship with children; physical contact with children; personal motivation; privacy from children's caregivers and from corrections staff during visits; increased support from peers; and personal growth.

Participation in EV allowed many mothers to build and maintain strong relationships with their children. Several mothers reported that during visits, they felt that they were able to reassume their roles as mothers. One mother reported that the visits allow her to, *"still feel like their mom when they're here."* Mothers of infants were especially appreciative of the opportunity to bond with their children, stating that, *"being in the program is the only way to have a relationship with your baby. Otherwise, they wouldn't know who you are... I had him in here."* Nearly all mothers mentioned enjoying the physical contact (e.g., hugs, hand-holding) they were allowed to have with their children during EV. Allowing physical contact and expression of affection between mothers and their children is notably different than the restrictions on physical contact during typical visits (e.g., brief hug and kiss on the cheek).

Many women reported that the living unit and the availability of the program served as a source of personal motivation. One mother shared that participating in EV has, *"made me a better person in controlling myself with the other offenders. In this unit, you have to be on your best behavior."* Another stated that the program has, *"kept me focused on what my purpose is when I leave here."* Several mothers mentioned areas of personal growth through their participation in the program including forgiveness, learning how to handle anger, increased patience, and increased confidence in one's parenting ability.

During EV, mothers and their children are afforded more privacy than during typical visits. Most notably, the children's caregivers do not participate in EV. Having the caregiver present for the entire duration of a visit, as occurs during typical visiting, can be uncomfortable and may prevent mothers and children from openly discussing certain issues. With EV, there is also more privacy from correctional staff. One mother stated, *"In the visiting room, I'm under surveillance and their dad is there. In [EV], it's more open."*

Both mothers and children formed relationships with peers through EV. Mothers were able to share priorities with other women in the program (e.g., *"We are all reaching for the same*

goal – our kids.’), as well as garner emotional support, (e.g., *“There are other parents around who we can connect with and know we aren’t alone.”*). Mothers were not the only ones forming emotionally supportive relationships with peers. Children also benefitted in this way. One mother shared, *“My kids have made friends with other kids coming to visit. My daughter texts with other girls she has met here. It’s a sense of they’re not alone in this.”*

Caregivers’ perspectives of benefits—Caregivers also emphasized the benefits of supporting strong mother-child relationships and the physical contact allowed between mothers and children, as well as expressing enthusiastic support for the program more generally. Like mothers, many caregivers reported that the primary benefit of the program was building or maintaining the relationship between the mother and her child, stating that the program helps children, *“know mom is in [their] life,”* and allows both parties to feel *“still connected.”* Caregivers also echoed the special importance of this bonding between mothers and infants, stating, *“He was just 5 months old when she went in. Without EV, he wouldn’t know mom at all.”* Similar to mothers, caregivers recognized the benefit to children of having natural physical contact with their mothers. Caregivers were overwhelmingly positive about the program in general, saying, *“I believe in it and hope it continues for the kids’ sake.”* Other caregivers stated, *“I really support the program and want to do anything I can to make sure it happens for other families,”* and, *“[The children] really need those visits. It’s like therapy. They were so insecure when I got them, but now they’re strong and happy because they get to see her.”*

Mothers’ perspectives of barriers—In addition to benefits, mothers identified a number of barriers, including desire for longer visits and more unstructured times, as well as a need for more age-appropriate activities. Despite the extended duration compared to typical visiting, many mothers felt that the visit was still too short, noting that time, *“goes by too fast.”* One mother remarked that, *“no mother can ever have enough time with her kids.”* Many mothers expressed the desire to have children stay overnight at the prison. This idea was likely fueled by the knowledge among this group of women that overnight visits were available for residents in this living unit many years earlier. Another common suggestion for improving the program was to allow more unstructured time if the mother and child would rather not participate in structured activities. This desire for more time to *“just talk”* and to *“spend time alone hanging out”* was especially pronounced in mothers of adolescents. Lastly, mothers mentioned that the activities offered were sometimes inappropriate for teenagers and very young children (i.e., infants).

Caregivers’ perspectives of barriers—Caregivers’ perceptions of barriers centered around logistic issues and children’s reactions to visiting their mother. Most frequently, caregivers noted that the long travel presented a substantial challenge in bringing the children to participate in EV. This concern was especially salient for caregivers who lived out of state, but was also significant for many in-state families, as many still had to travel long distances and such travel had many associated costs. Among those costs mentioned by caregivers were the price of gas, plane tickets, overnight accommodations, and food. Additionally, as caregivers are not allowed to participate in the visit themselves, they noted barriers in finding something to do during the time children were with their mothers, which

many agreed was “*difficult to do without spending money.*” A handful of caregivers mentioned children’s reactions before and after visiting posed an additional challenge. One caregiver shared that, “*a few days after the visits, his anxiety level soared. He got all stirred up.*” Another caregiver noted, “*as much as she looks forward to seeing mom, there was always a major behavioral issue before going, which was not fun for anyone.*” Some caregivers noted that the strictness of the drop-off rules for visits was problematic, including rules about appropriate clothing and issues with the required pre-visit paperwork. One caregiver explained that they were “*frustrated with the check-in process,*” while another shared their “*disappointment around a cancelled visit due to paperwork not being filled out on time.*”

Comparison to Typical Visiting

For those families who had also participated in typical visiting ($n = 20$ families), we asked mothers and caregivers to compare these experiences to their experiences in EV. When asked which type of visiting they preferred, 100% of mothers reported that they and their children preferred EV to typical visits. The reasons for the preference centered on the following themes: physical contact, the provision of activities, the more comfortable and natural feeling of interactions, privacy from the children’s caregiver and from corrections staff, the length of visiting, and the strict rules in typical visiting and the difficulty in following those rules.

Similarly, all but one caregiver who reported that the child in their care had participated in both types of visits indicated that the child preferred EV to typical visits. The sole caregiver who did not indicate a preference for EV explained that the child was an infant (under 1 year old), and so they felt it was impossible to determine which type of visit the child actually preferred. Similar themes emerged in caregivers’ responses when asked why children preferred EV over typical visits as had emerged in mothers’ answers to the same question, including the following: the physical contact allowed in EV, as well as the strictness of rules in typical visiting and the difficulty in following those rules, particularly for young children.

In addition to reporting overall preference for type of visiting, participants provided satisfaction ratings for each type of visiting on a 7- point Likert scale ranging from *extremely unsatisfied* (1) to *extremely satisfied* (7). Mothers indicated a lower average satisfaction with typical visits ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.63$) than with EV ($M = 6.79$, $SD = .42$). Caregivers reported a similar pattern of satisfaction ratings; rating typical visits an average of 4.25 ($SD = 1.34$) and extended visits a 6.42 ($SD = .77$). In addition, both mothers’ and caregivers’ satisfaction ratings of typical visiting were more variable than their ratings of extended visiting, which were almost exclusively highly rated (scores of 6 or 7) by both mothers and caregivers (see Figures 1 and 2).

Discussion

The results of the current study add to a body of literature suggesting that enhanced visitation programs for incarcerated mothers and their children are associated with positive experiences (e.g., Poehlmann et al., 2010). The present investigation is unique in comparing women and caregivers’ experiences with enhanced versus typical visiting in a single sample.

The views expressed by mothers and caregivers in the current study indicate that one form of enhanced visitation, EV, is preferred to typical visiting, for several reasons. EV allows more natural physical contact between a mother and her child, something highly lacking in typical visits. The time spent during EV includes activities and movement. This is in direct contrast to typical visits, where activities are restricted to conversation across a table, which can be difficult and frustrating, especially for very young children. Mothers participating in EV get a chance to spend time privately with their children, whereas typical visits can be made uncomfortable by the presence of caregivers, other visitors, and facility staff. Finally, EV extends the amount of time mothers and children get to spend together reconnecting and maintaining their relationships.

There are other aspects of visitation that were not currently part of EV, but data from the present study indicate might be useful to include in other enhanced visitation programs. The developmental appropriateness of activities for visiting children is important to consider. In the current study, mothers expressed the desire for more unstructured time with their adolescents, as well as the need for more age-appropriate toys and activities for infants and very young children. Caregivers' concerns centered on the costs and logistics of travel to the prison, along with challenging emotional and behavioral responses some children had to the visits. Enhanced visitation programs at this facility and elsewhere would likely be improved by better supporting caregivers' needs in this regard. The provision of transportation to and from the prison, for instance, may help alleviate the financial and logistical burdens of visits. Likewise, supporting caregivers in their management of child behaviors before and after visitation may mitigate children's challenging behaviors described by some caregivers in this study. Children could be prepared for seeing their incarcerated parent, in an attempt to improve their emotional state before and after visiting. For example, resources like *Sesame Workshop's Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration* resource kit could be a valuable way to support caregivers in this regard. Evaluation of this resource kit is currently underway (Oades-Sese, 2015) and will provide important information about the utility of this resource for children and families.

While findings from the present study suggest changes could be made to traditional visiting to make visits more enjoyable for mothers and their children, such as allowing physical contact between mothers and children, as well as lengthening visiting time, future research should also examine which specific features of enhanced visitation programs are most strongly associated with positive outcomes. Researchers should consider the experience of the visit itself as well as mothers' and children's outcomes following visitation. It is possible, for instance, that certain aspects of enhanced visitation are associated with a more positive experience in the moment, but visiting is still linked to difficult child reactions and behaviors following the visit.

In examining the experience of the visit itself, researchers should consider observing visits to code factors related to mothers' and children's experiences. Some standardized tools exist that would be appropriate for coding affect, mood, and general environmental variables (e.g., noise level in the facility). One promising tool is the Jail Observation Checklist, which permits standardized coding of child behaviors, affect, and facility level variables during the wait, the security procedures, and the visit itself (Poehlmann, Runion, Weymouth, &

Burnson, 2015). Further, mothers' affect during visits could be observed and recorded using Loper and colleagues' (2014) coding scheme, which was originally developed to examine the contents of video messages between incarcerated parents and their children. In addition to observational coding of mother-child visits, self-report could also be included. One promising self-report tool specifically designed for this population is the Parenting Stress Index for Incarcerated Women (Houck & Loper, 2002). Researchers could use this tool to compare mothers' ratings of incarceration-specific and general stress during both typical visiting and enhanced visiting.

In examining outcomes following visits, researchers should consider both proximal and distal outcomes. Relevant maternal outcomes to consider include maternal depressive symptoms, the occurrence of behavioral infractions in the correctional facility in the weeks following the visit, and maternal recidivism after release. When examining child outcomes, researchers may want to examine proximal outcomes such as caregiver reported child behavior in the hours and days immediately following the visit. Child academic functioning could be considered more proximally, in the weeks following the visit, or more distally, such as the child's overall grade point average at the end of formal schooling or occurrence of grade retention. Likewise child psychopathology can be considered both immediately following visits with their incarcerated mother and later in life. One could also consider the child's own likelihood of criminal convictions in the future. Previous work has shown that children with incarcerated mothers are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system themselves as adults (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Participation in high-quality mother-child visits may help mitigate this unfortunate intergenerational cycle. Lastly, researchers could consider measuring the quality of the maternal-child relationship and interactions after a mother's release, issues that are particularly important for children being cared for by their previously incarcerated mothers.

Future research should also examine the considerable heterogeneity of incarcerated mothers and their families (Arditti, 2015). Characteristics such as children's age, mother and child relationship prior to incarceration, and plans for caregiving following the mother's release will likely affect which features of enhanced visitation are associated with the best outcomes. Considering the length of visits, for instance, the ideal length may differ in relation to these mother and child characteristics. Younger children, especially those who have spent less time with their mother in the past, may fair better with visits that are shorter in duration. Older children and adolescents, on the other hand, may need more time with their mothers to reap the benefits of visitation (e.g., allowing time for emotional barriers to come down).

Implications for Corrections Programming and Policy

Following completion of this evaluation, the authors of this study met with the administration and staff at the prison to present preliminary results, discuss key findings, and consider implications of these findings for the facility and the program. At this meeting, the authors presented an executive summary of this report, as well as a presentation of the research methods, relevant findings, and implications. The group discussed potential strategies for further supporting incarcerated mothers' relationships with their children. The

group brainstormed several ideas, including opportunities to enhance the typical visiting environment to make the space more child-friendly for the many children and families that do not have the opportunity to participate in EV. To improve visiting experiences for both children and their caregivers, the group considered providing multi-media resources (e.g., a DVD describing the visiting process) to help prepare children for their visits and developing a guide for caregivers with information about local resources and activities (e.g., directions to the local library) that can be utilized while they wait for children participating in EV. Finally, the group saw opportunity in identifying ways to support overnight visits, while also recognizing the paramount priorities of safety and security.

Though the broader literature surrounding outcomes of visitation is mixed, visitation, when properly supported, holds the promise of the most intimate contact an incarcerated mother and her child are able to have, allowing the visiting pair to enjoy physical proximity, affection, and non-verbal communication, aspects that are all missing in other types of contact between incarcerated parents and their children (e.g., letter writing). Thus, it may be useful to improve current visiting practices by creating programs that include characteristics associated with positive outcomes, such as the EV program described in this manuscript. Specifically, the following aspects of visiting are associated with positive experiences for children and mothers: permitting physical contact between mother and child; lengthening visiting time to allow mothers and children to connect emotionally; not restricting movement of children, especially very young children; and allowing a certain amount of privacy from the caregiver and the prison staff during visiting. Administration and policy makers at other correctional facilities could consider including some or all of these aspects in current or future enhanced visitation programs. A note of caution is in order, however, as these pilot data do not definitively link these aspects with more positive experiences or outcomes, and more empirical work is needed in this regard.

Limitations

In the original conceptualization of the project, we planned to include children's perspectives. While the current study did include mothers' and caregivers' reports on children's behavior and their interpretation of children's feelings about visitation, the current project does not include children's perspectives directly. Although University researchers and prison staff, originally intended to include children's perspectives, in working with the Department of Corrections Human Subjects Review Board, it became clear that there were significant barriers from the prison's perspective to including children in the current study. Thus, the current study only examines mothers' and their children's caregivers' experiences with, and perceptions of, EV. Future research on EV at this facility, as well as research on visiting and parenting programs in general should certainly directly assess the experiences of participating children. Understanding children's perspectives on visitation is essential to creating and supporting enhanced visitation that meets their needs, as well as the needs of their incarcerated parents.

Future evaluation of this and other enhanced visitation programs might consider comparing recidivism rates among inmates who did and did not participate, matched on key variables (e.g., age, race, disciplinary referrals, sentence length). At this particular prison, finding such

a comparison group is complicated by the fact that women participating in EV must meet specific behavioral criteria before they are accepted into the program. Thus, many of the remaining women in the general population would not be directly comparable to the women participating in EV, as many of them may not have met these criteria. A promising solution may lie in the fact that the privileged living unit is not large enough to house all women who meet eligibility criteria. In fact, at most times there is a waiting list of women who have met behavioral criteria, but are not currently housed in the living unit and thus not participating in EV. This group would be more similar to the participating women than a comparison with the general prison population, and thus may be an appropriate wait-list control for future research.

Conclusions

In conclusion, women and caregivers were both overwhelmingly positive about EV and preferred EV to typical visits. Mothers felt supported in the program, both through their interactions with other mothers and in their relationships with their children. This building and maintenance of strong mother-child relationships has implications for successful reintegration into the community following their release from prison and directly supports the intended purpose of the EV program, as outlined in the state's Department of Correction's policy. Such a program could serve as a model for other corrections systems that aim to enhance mother-child relationships in the context of corrections.

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Satisfaction with Typical Visits

Figure 1.
Mother and caregiver satisfaction with typical visits

Satisfaction with Extended Visits

Figure 2.
Mother and caregiver satisfaction with extended visits

Table 1

Differences between Extended Visiting and typical visiting

	Extended Visiting	Typical Visiting
Length	~4 hours	~1 hour
Location	Children's Room	Visiting Room
Structure	Planned, child-centered activities	None
Physical Contact	Physical contact allowed	Limited physical contact