

# Read to Your Child: Fathers' Perspectives

**Family Literacy for Incarcerated  
Fathers in Pennsylvania**

Tabitha Stickel, Esther Prins, & Anna Kaiper  
Pennsylvania State University

Correctional Education Association Conference  
May 9, 2019

# Overview

- Poll Questions
- Background: Incarcerated Parents in the USA
- Read to Your Child/Grandchild Program
- Research Methods
- Findings
- Addendum and Future Directions
- Discussion



# Incarcerated Parents in the USA

- Over 5 million U.S. children have experienced parental incarceration during their lifetime
- 11% of U.S. children (1.7 to 2.7 million) have a parent behind bars
  - 2/3 of parents incarcerated for non-violent offenses
- Racial disparities: African American and Latino children more likely to have incarcerated parents
- Pennsylvania: 2/3 of people in state prisons are parents



# Incarcerated Parents in the USA

- Adverse outcomes of parents' incarceration for children
  - More likely to become involved in criminal justice system
  - Lower non-cognitive school readiness (behavior)
  - Decreased reading scores after parent is incarcerated
  - Higher risk for experiencing depression & anxiety
  - Lower educational attainment as adults
  - Increased externalizing behavioral problems
- Adverse outcomes for parents
  - Loss of contact with family
  - Termination of parental rights
  - Divorce
  - Financial hardship



# Family Literacy for Incarcerated Parents

- Prison-based family literacy and book reading programs are increasing, but research is scant.
- Read to Your Child/Grandchild (RYCG) Program
  - Offered in PA state prisons
  - Inmates with child or grandchild (up to age 12)
  - Aims: “increase the relationship between the child and adult, enhance family literacy, enrich one’s life through reading, and...make a positive influence stressing the importance of literacy development through a shared reading experience” (PR Newswire, 2013)
  - Select children’s book and make scrapbook → videotape of inmate reading book (plus personal message) → DVD, book, and scrapbook sent to child
    - Can make multiple videos

# Research Questions

- How do incarcerated fathers use the RYCG Program to relate to their child(ren)?
- How does the video format foster different kinds of connection between fathers and children?
- What role does the program play in fathers' involvement in their children's learning and education?

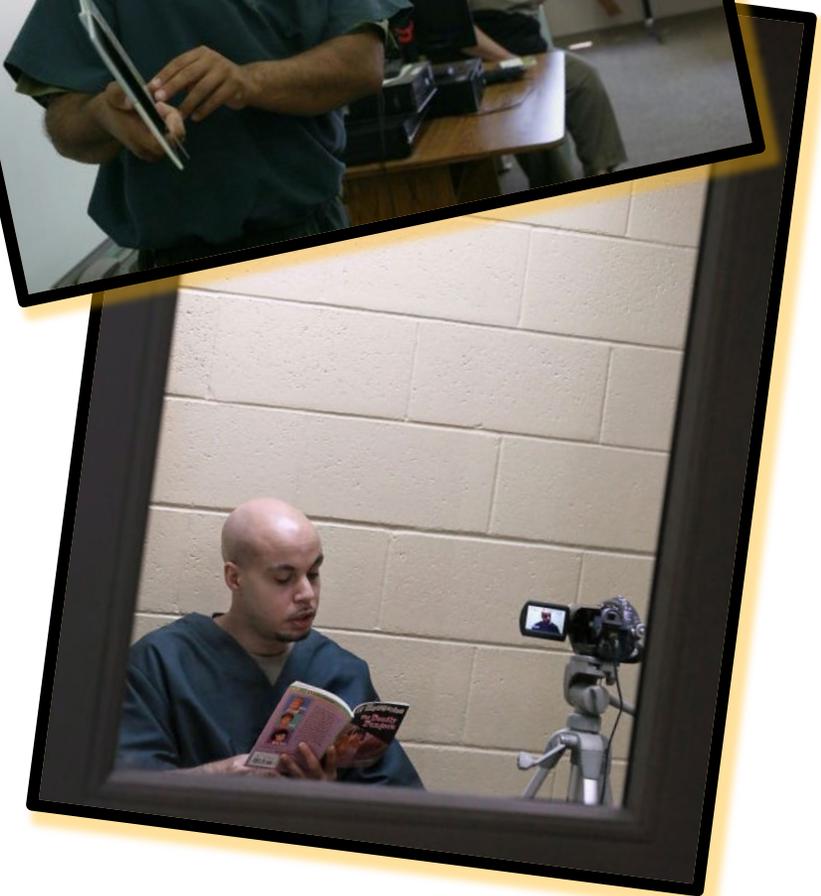
# Research Methods

- Qualitative pilot study
  - Maximum security men's SCI
  - Rural county
  - Several hours from major cities
  - Hard for family members to visit
  - Lockdown: limited written communication
    - Can't receive reading materials
    - No original letters, photos from family



# Research Methods

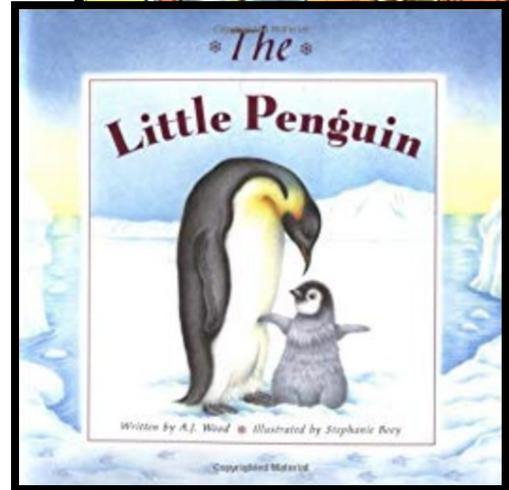
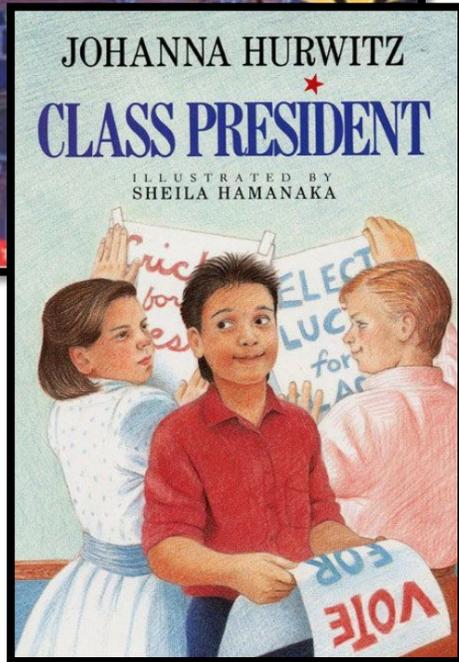
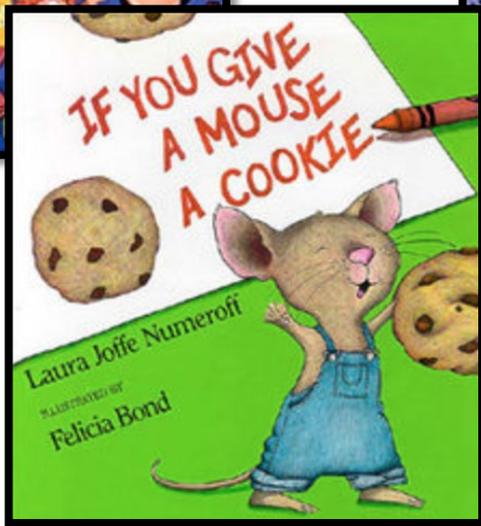
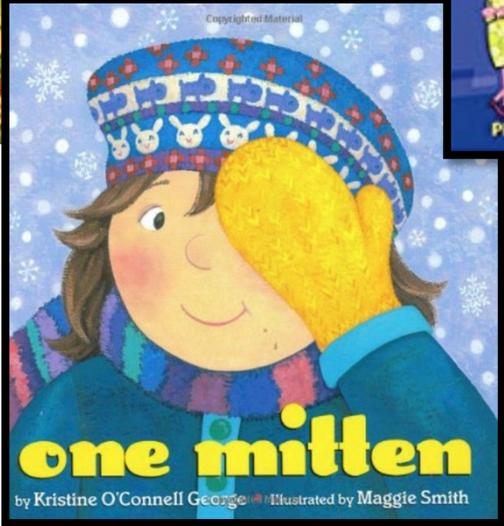
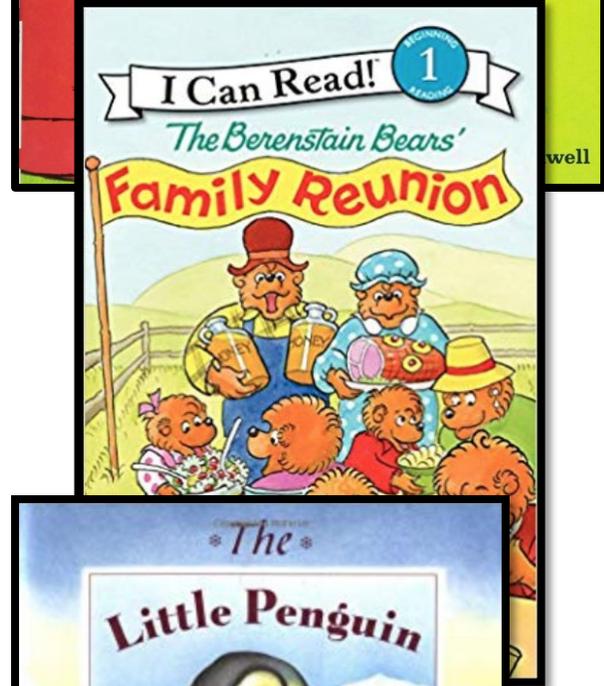
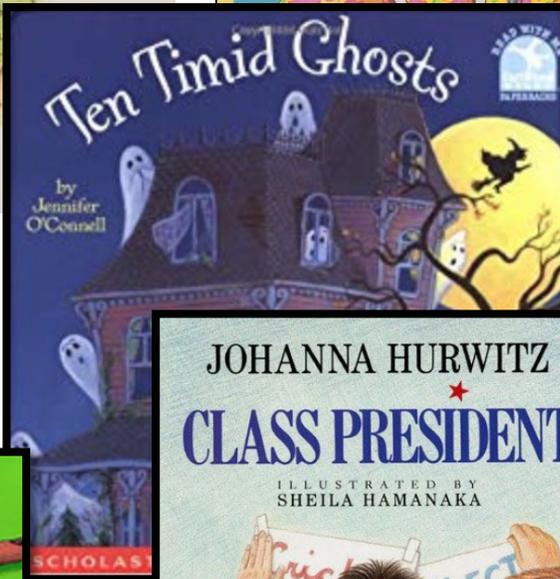
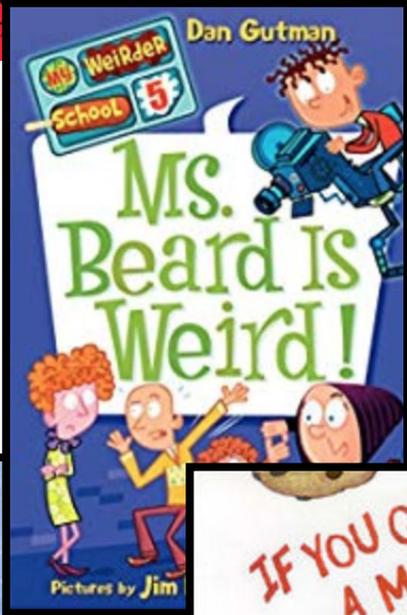
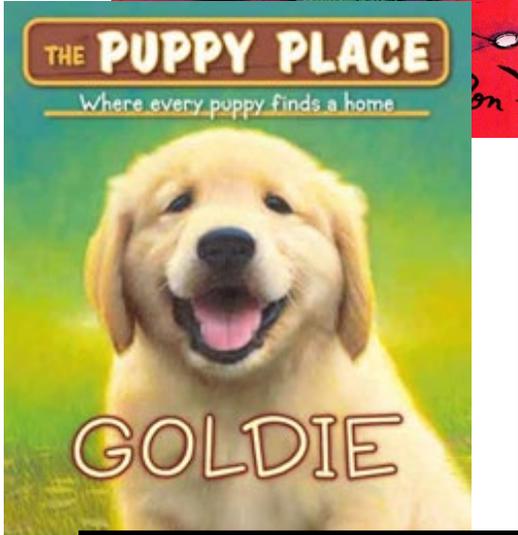
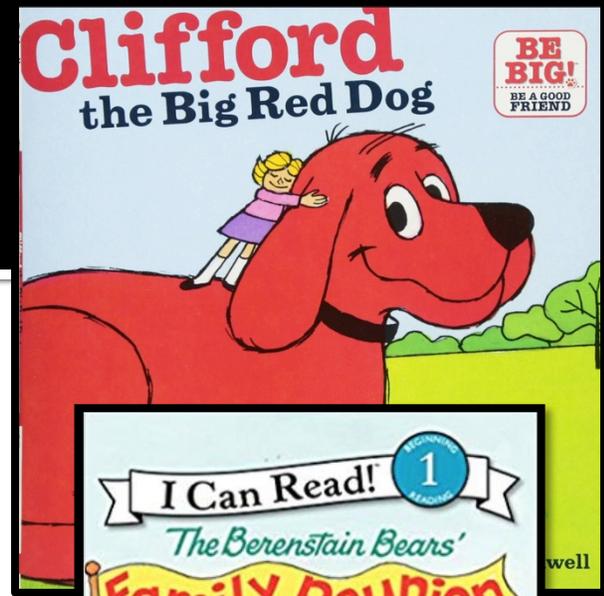
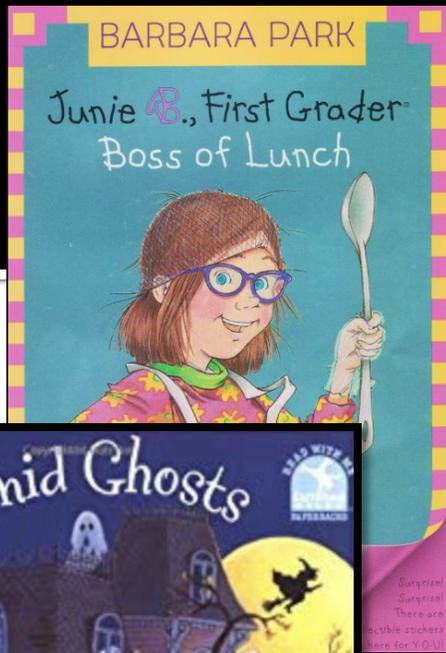
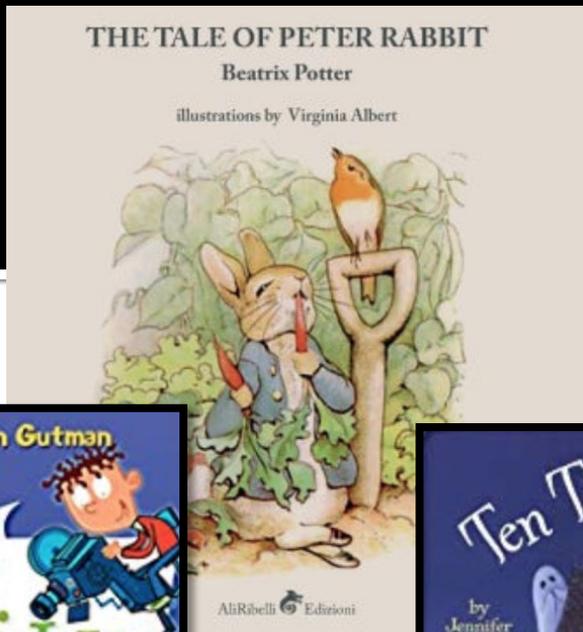
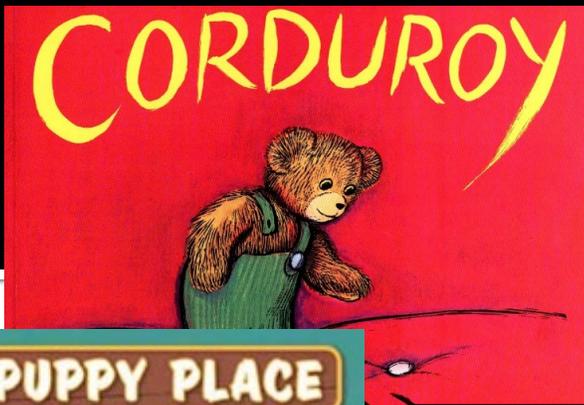
- Sample: inmates who signed up for program (n=11)
- Data sources:
  - Observed all videotaping sessions (n=18) → fieldnotes
    - 5 to 70 minutes (avg. ~20)
    - Initial interviews with inmates (n=11) (avg. 55 min.)
    - Follow-up interviews (n=5)
    - Interviews with corrections teacher and principal
- Reciprocity: donated children's coloring and activity books



# Research Methods: Participants



- Age: 28 to 48
- Race: 6 African American, 3 White, 1 Latino, 1 multiracial
- Educational attainment
  - 3: no HS degree
  - 4: HS or GED
  - 3: some college
  - 1: bachelor's degree
    - Higher level of education than U.S. inmates (40% lack HS degree)
- Total incarceration (lifetime): 20 mos. to 16 years
- 3 had previously participated in RYCG
- 1 to 8 children (mode = 2), some with different mothers
  - Some had not met their child or were incarcerated when child was <1 year old



# Findings: How fathers use RYCG to relate to their children

- Teach children moral lessons and offer advice
  - Instructions for life, school and academics, behavior, attitudes, safety, moral and religious instruction
  - “Always listen to people that love you, like Mommy and Daddy. You will run into a few hiccups in life. It’s what you do and the lessons you learn later in life that defines who you are.” (Jones)
  - “When you look at your choices in life and make the right decisions, you’ll be rewarded with a more promising future. Being that I did the total opposite, I’m being rewarded with not being able to be around for holidays, birthdays, school events, or the precious moments of seeing you grow into a beautiful young woman.” (Scho)

# Findings: How fathers use RYCG to relate to their children

- Provides opportunity to explain why they are gone and rectify negative perceptions
  - “Daddy made a mistake and needed a time out. It’s like if you made a mistake and you have to go to the corner because you did something wrong; Daddy did something wrong.” (Ron)
  - “It just gives them [his children] different insight on who you are. You know, they always hear about daddy and being in prison and they automatically think he’s like a bad guy off the movie. But this will open their eyes and see that daddy is just another person.” (Rundy)



# Findings: How fathers use RYCG to relate to their children

- Fathers can let children know that they “are okay”
  - “It lets them know that we’re doing fine. We’re still the same father that was hopefully in their lives before, you know what I mean?” (Brandon)
  - “Well I ain’t gonna lie—I went back with a smile on my face yesterday just thinking about my daughter being able to see daddy on TV reading a book to her. So it just made a hard situation that much easier to cope with.” (Jones)



# Findings: How fathers use RYCG to relate to their children

- Send children the message that dad thinks and cares about them
  - “I think this class alone will show the children that their dads really love ‘em, you know. You can always send letters and stuff like that and talk to your kids. But to show, and for them to see, that you want to be in their lives and you want to take time out of your life to make them happy, that's the world.” (Brandon)
  - “You know, it shows the kids that dad still cares. Even though he’s not there, he cares. That he took his time out to make this video for me.” (Ron)

# Findings: How fathers use RYCG to relate to their children

- Program allows fathers to be there (be present) without physically being there
  - “It’s real cool to really interact with your kids without being there...As far as my son, he’s still breaking up words to learn how to read and all that so it’s like, for me to be able to read it [the book] with him and he can just read along, it works out perfectly.” (Malik)
  - “It made me look at like, okay, well even though I’m not there, I still have some type of influence on him, you know. He realizes, okay, that’s my dad. But he’s not here now. But he’s telling me things...I can, here, put this DVD in, that’s my dad, okay.” (Ron)

# Findings: How video format fosters different kinds of connection



- Allows kids to see and hear their dad → involves more senses
  - “[My son] doesn’t really know me that well. He has pictures of me....And he says, ‘That’s Daddy.’ He knows that. But I want him to really get to see me, hear me, hear my...voice coming from me [rather than] just see a picture and then hear a voice, but can’t put it together.” (Rundy)
  - “Body language. Body language. Yeah. It’s [video] just more lifelike.” (Carl)

# Findings: How video format fosters different kinds of connection

- Lasting keepsake and continually accessible
  - “It’s a program that keeps giving, essentially. I mean, you can watch a video today, you can watch a video tomorrow, the next day, the next day, and the next day. So...my wife can always turn that video on. Because there’s days when [my son is] like, ‘I just miss you, Dad.’ So she can turn the video on.” (John)
  - “Because sometimes at four years old, the time I can talk on the phone might not be a good time for him.” (John)
  - “[My son will] have a bunch of the DVDs to be able to look back and say, ‘Well, okay, dad wasn't there the first couple years but this is what he did to be there...to make it seem as though he was there. He was still there actually.’” (Ron)

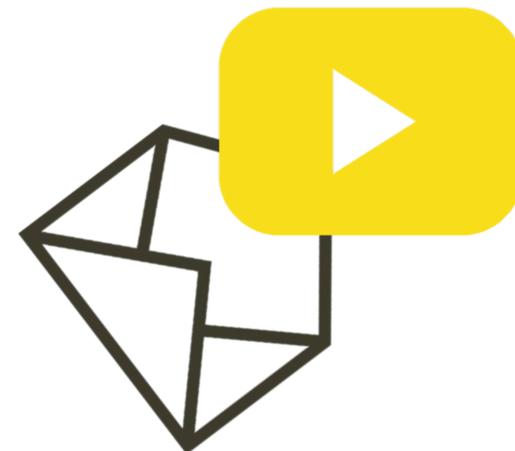
# Findings: How video format fosters different kinds of connection

- Video is useful for children's learning and emotional regulation
  - “It's something useful, you know. They can learn from it. So if I'm helping teaching them, that just makes me feel a little better.” (Ron)
  - “Somebody can send this home and it's a nice cheery video and their kid only watches it when they're crying or upset or something like that. Then they can see okay, when your kid's upset, your video, your actions just improved his lifestyle, his mood.” (John)



# Findings: How video format fosters different kinds of connection

- Only SCI program that allows inmates to send video to family
  - “Videos of this caliber can’t be done any other way [in prison]. It won’t happen....The book is a nice gesture. The video is something that you can’t do anywhere else.” (Carl)
  - “The phone calls are an upgrade from the letters. And the video is an upgrade from them all....But the visit would be even better than all of that [*laughs*]....Which like I said, I ended up pulling the visit out of that.” (Scho)
    - Son and the mom came to visit after receiving the DVD package



# Findings: Fathers' involvement in children's learning and education

- Emphasized importance of education and schooling, respect for teachers
  - “Scho tells M’onique to protect herself with knowledge and that education is important. Without education, he says, it’s going ‘to get dark.’ He tells her he got his GED in math and that he will take the science and social studies tests this month.” (fieldnotes)
  - “Ron begins to tell Omari [age 2] that he needs to do well in school. ‘I know you will do well, and I promise it will get more exciting as you get older,’ Ron says. He notes that he too had to go through school, as he was made to finish by his mother and grandmother.” (fieldnotes)
  - Use education to combat racist stereotypes: “It used to be like a racial slur they used to say...if you wanna hide stuff from a Black person, just put it in a book. Kinda like we won’t open up a book. So now it’s kinda like, to break that type of chain...You’re African American. You need to try to educate yourself and read a little bit more.” (LaDiDaDi)

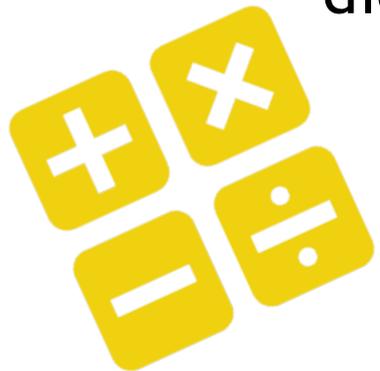
# Findings: Fathers' involvement in children's learning and education



- Vehicle to convey importance of literacies and numeracy
  - RYCG “did open my eyes a little bit with more reading. I don't think I ever had bedtime story time. I think those would be one of the things I would be interested in when I get home with my son.” (El Jefe)
  - “Well, obviously I've learned how important...reading to your daughter or son at an early age, how important it is. And good for them. And you know, opens their imagination at an early age.” (Jones)

# Findings: Fathers' involvement in children's learning and education

- Tailored scrapbook and video to child's educational and learning needs, interests
  - Included artistic, cognitive, and socio-emotional activities
    - E.g., coloring pages, mazes, shapes, letters, numbers, feelings chart
  - Extended previous educational efforts (e.g., teaching letters, numbers)
  - Scho's 6-year-old had trouble with addition and subtraction: "So instead of just doing the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 [listing the numbers], I did actual math problems for her."



# Children's responses

- Data on responses of 10 kids (5 dads)
- Emotions: “ecstatic,” “loved it,” “excitement,” “I cried the whole video, Dad.”
- Watched video repeatedly
- Literacy practices
  - Read along in book, carried it around, showed it to others, brought it to school
  - Prompted child to check out *Goosebumps* books from library
  - Practiced writing name (copied dad in video)
  - Used scrapbook (coloring & activity pages, etc.)
  - Children's responses “made me feel like I want to do it again, like I want to keep doing it....It made me feel like it gives them the interest in books and stuff....Especially when they saying that they [kids] keep looking through the book and want people to read them to them....It made me feel good. Made me feel real good.” (Rundy)

# Children's responses

- Stronger parent-child bond
  - Son and his mom visited Scho at SCI
  - 2-year-old son “really liked it,” wants dad to make more videos. “He said, ‘You're so funny.’...He kept saying, ‘My daddy on TV, my daddy on TV.’” (Ron)
  - Rundy:
    - 3-year-old son with autism; son “doesn't know him very well”; hadn't seen son for ~17 months
    - He is “walking around all the time with the book....When [his mom] told him that I was on the phone...he went and got the book, was like, ‘Hi, Dad.’....When...she put the DVD on for him, first he was just sitting there, then he seen me. And she said he smiled and looked and pointed at the screen. And then he ran and got the book and started looking along with it, pointing at stuff with his mom. So I was like, that's good. That's good....So it felt good to know that he knows who I am still.”

# Closing thoughts

- Closing thoughts on the program
  - “I think that this is a really good program for people who are serious about being in they children’s lives....If...your family can’t get up here to see them and they can’t bring their kids with them, I think this is one of the best programs to help people be not only just a part of their kid’s life but a positive part of their kid’s life and not just, you know, a burden.” (Rundy)
  - “I mean, it means a lot. It’s a tool that needs to be used...It’s a necessary program for incarcerated parents.” (Carl)
  - “Because we’re not the only one doing time. They do it with us. So, this is definitely a blessing.” (Jones)

# Addendum and future directions



- Updates
  - 2 participants have been released
    - Scho passed final GED test
  - 1 participant moved to lower-security section
  - Case worker wouldn't let Carl send DVD to daughter in foster care: judge granted permission
- Implications
  - Opportunity to initiate, maintain, or strengthen bonds with children
  - Avenue for supporting children's learning and literacies
  - Fathers valued video format: see and hear without visiting
  - Future research on FL in prisons

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# Discussion

- How does this study apply to your work in correctional education?
- What opportunities do you see to help incarcerated parents support their children's learning and education?



# Author contact information

- Anna Kaiper
  - Associate Director, Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy & Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Pennsylvania State University
  - [axk122@psu.edu](mailto:axk122@psu.edu); 814-865-6686
- Esther Prins
  - Professor, Lifelong Learning & Adult Education Program, Penn State
  - Co-Director, Goodling Institute & Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy
  - [esp150@psu.edu](mailto:esp150@psu.edu); 814-865-0597
- Tabitha Stickel
  - Ph.D. Candidate, Lifelong Learning & Adult Education Program, Penn State
  - [trs33@psu.edu](mailto:trs33@psu.edu)