

Inmates learn parenting skills Hawaiian dads reading to their children from Arizona via recordings

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ELOY, Arizona — It's never too late to try being the best parent one can be — even from a prison cell miles away from home.

More than 100 Hawaiian prisoners housed in Eloy are learning to do just that, through books, thanks to a program of the Hawaii-based Read-to-Me International organization.

For example, it's been hard on Garret Borges, an inmate at the strictly Hawaiian CCA prison Saguaro Correctional Facility in Eloy, and his family since his incarceration. His daughters, one 6 and a set of 4-year-old twins, haven't seen their father in the flesh in almost four years. Letters can only do so much, and a single 20-minute phone call to Hawaii costs about \$5. Borges used to call multiple times a week. But even that's had to be cut back in the flailing economy, since Borges' wife has just recently been laid off from work.

But Borges and about 130 other Hawaiian prisoners with children on the outside have discovered a new way to keep a relationship with their kids despite being apart — simply by reading books to them.

Reading to a child not only makes reading a fun activity but helps form a bond between the child and the reader. It benefits the child listening, expanding the attention span and demonstrating proper grammar and a rich vocabulary, and helps the child's language skills development along with critical thinking.

Thanks to a \$1.25 million "Promoting Responsible Fatherhood" federal grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Saguaro has been able to give incarcerated parents a program called "Fathers Bridging the Miles," part of the Read-to-Me International organization. Read-to-Me is a literacy program based in Hawaii. It's given hundreds of Hawaiian inmates imprisoned on the mainland a chance to choose two books a month to send to each of their children ages 2 to 10 years. But the biggest gift is that they get to read themselves, using a digital recorder so their children can pop in the CD and read along with their physically absent father.

Borges has been participating in Fathers Bridging the Miles for just over a year. And with three kids, he's taken full advantage of the program, having read almost 80 books so far. "My wife had to buy a new bookshelf, just for all the books I send them," he laughs.



EmifJoe (Keola) Nahinu, upper left photo, Richard Chanco, upper right photo, and Garret Borges, lower left photo, are shown with books they are reading to their children by recording. The Read-to-Me program for Hawaiian inmates at Saguaro Correctional Facility has a "Fathers Bridging the Miles" initiative geared toward keeping incarcerated fathers in relationship with their children.

The program also commits inmates to take part in a yearlong parenting class to prepare them for their eventual return to their families. The parenting classes cover everything from child discipline and anger management to supporting child identity and financial management. The program also gives prisoners taking part one-on-one mentoring with master's-level social worker Patryce Samuel. There, they can informally discuss issues they're facing as parents and ask questions of Samuel — and each other.

The prison does offer a once-a-month, 15-minute video conferencing session for prisoners. But Fathers Bridging the Miles gives inmates an additional half-hour video visit every quarter.

"It's a pretty comprehensive program," Samuel says. "They get to keep in touch with their children, and it increases their confidence as fathers."

And the program is open to all prisoners, no matter the length of time they have left to serve. Prisoners with a history of domestic violence or crimes against children, on the other hand, are screened from participating.

There is a wide spectrum of fatherhood skills in the program, from first-time, single fathers to married men with well-established families. Samuel says that statistics promote doom and gloom for kids of imprisoned parents — predicting they'll turn out just like their parents. Although it's a relative fallacy, she states, "If we can help facilitate a bond with the father and their children, then we can reduce those numbers."

It's been a long, hard road for inmate Richard Chanco, who has a 6-year-old son, his first child, currently living in Turkey with his grandmother. Chanco was first imprisoned when his son was only 4 months old, and in a correctional facility in Mississippi that didn't have the ability to allow international calls. His child only knew him through pictures and letters. Although he's been able to keep an ongoing relationship with him by making and sending him things like blankets, stickers and stuffed pillow "arms" for hugs, he's in various classes while in prison and calls the Read-To-Me program "a blessing." Now, his son has books chosen by his father and a medium on which he can actually hear his father's voice — at any time he wishes.

"I just got a letter the other day from my mother-in-law saying that my son said he has 'the best dad in the world' because I'm sending him all sorts of things," Chanco says. "This program has helped me realize that just the little things help. To hear him say I'm the best dad in the world, and he doesn't even know me except through pictures and through my voice based on the recorder ... that hurt. This was a hard lesson."

As parents, inmates in the Read-to-Me program lament that they've missed out on some of the most important moments in their children's lives, such as their first steps, words or first days of school, but they hope that the personal touch this program allows them makes up somewhat for those missing years. Chanco even adds little personal messages at the tail end of his readings for his son in Turkey.

"I'm able to talk to him on the recorder, ask him how he's doing and carry on a regular conversation instead of just through letters and pictures," he says.

And the recordings are a gift that can keep on giving, Borges adds. His oldest daughter brings the books and Borges' recordings to her first-grade class so that the entire class can benefit from it.

"Her teacher has told her and my wife that even with me being in here, she's getting more reading done to her than kids who have fathers with them," he said.

And it's a boon for the men, as well. Randy Konohia, serving his sixth year of a 10-year sentence, admits that before entering the Read-To-Me program, he wasn't a big fan of books. But since his

children, between 6 and 9 years, have been getting the books and his recordings, he himself has gotten more enthusiastic about reading.

“My kids tell me, ‘Oh, Dad, I like when you laugh on the CD and make all kinds of noises,’” Konohia recounts. “That’s what they like, and it made me happy to hear them all excited about hearing my voice. And for my kids, I’m willing to do anything, even if I’ve got to be goofy. For a guy that don’t read, and now I’m reading, it’s making me broader, too.”

And Konohia isn’t the only inmate parent who really gets into character. Program assistant Janet Descherd recalls how one inmate had recently chosen a book about a Western cowboy, and read with as much of a cowboy twang as he could muster.

“It was so funny, because he still has a strong Hawaiian accent,” she said. “And we have another who is trying to do a Jamaican accent for a book about Jamaica.”

Fathers in the program also say that Bridging the Miles has helped them feel like they’re taking a more proactive role in their children’s lives, even if it’s just as simple as choosing a book tailored to their child’s personality. One father knows his son likes dinosaurs while another picks books he read as a kid and wants to share with his children. One inmate’s daughter was born with hand abnormalities and is often teased about it at school. So he sent her a book called “Don’t Laugh at Me” about kids who look or sound different so that she wouldn’t feel alone. Konohia shares an interest in hula dancing with his twin daughters, and often chooses to send books related to hula and Hawaiian culture to maintain that bond. When he’s released, his daughters will be 13.

In addition to doing what they can to keep up with their children’s lives and interests, the program has been beneficial for inmates like Samuel Guzman Jr. Guzman has a 3-year-old son he’s yet to meet. When asked whether he felt he’ll be ready in two years to take on the full responsibility of being a father, he expressed optimism.

“This class has taught me a lot, that there’s a lot more to being a father than I expected.

“I grew up without a dad,” he explained. “But just to have [my son] is a blessing, and whatever responsibility that comes with it. No matter how hard life gets.”

Every fiscal year, the program allows another 60 prisoners to join into the program. Saguaro’s participation is expected to grow to 180 next year.

To learn more, visit the organization’s Web site at www.readtomeintl.org.

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