

Storybook Project

Storybook Projects throughout the United States provide children of incarcerated parents the gift of a book and the voices of their parents on tape reading the book. This gives the children an opportunity to hear their absent parent's voice whenever they wish. Lutheran Social Services of Illinois's Storybook Project began in 1998 at Logan Correctional Center in Illinois. It now is in 11 prisons and jails, mainly in central and southern Illinois. These projects were based on Aunt Mary's Storybook Program at Cook County Jail in Chicago. The originator of that program was Companions, Journeying Together, Inc.

How to (and Why) Do a Storybook Project

**Modeled on the *Aunt Mary's Storybook Project* of
'Companions, Journeying Together, Inc.'**

It is an easy idea. Just collect new paperback children's books, bring them and a tape recorder into prison, help the mom and dads there to read stories to their kids on tape and then mail the books and tapes to the children. As simple as it is, this is a most important project and ministry. The children can turn on the tape recorder and hear their mom/dad's voice whenever they feel lonely. They play the tape over and over. Each time they hear their mom read the story and say, "I miss you, I love you." It never gets old. It's the next best thing to having mom or dad right there with them.

SO HOW DO VOLUNTEERS GET STARTED?

The reason volunteers like you are needed to do this program is so that nothing inappropriate is sent out of the prison. Volunteers need to be part of a respected group to be trusted enough by a warden to be allowed to bring books, tapes and tape recorders into a jail or prison and to work with the women and men. For instance, your group might be a prison ministry group with a good track record, a social service group or professional sorority. Plan to meet with the warden of programming or the volunteer coordinator to explain what you would like to do. Tell them this is being done across the United States in county jails, state and federal facilities and for both men and women.

Plan to start with a short-term project--for example, with a nearby facility in the time before Christmas or Mother's or Father's Day.

Gathering the books and tapes you need is a wonderful chance for the general public to begin to be aware that there are many children who have parents in prison. Ask for donated, cellophane-wrapped **60-minute** tapes and multicultural and urban-appropriate books for children, ages 1 - 14. Books need to be new (since these are the only gifts children will receive from their inmate parent) and paperback (since they must be light enough to mail). Women's groups, fraternal organizations, scout groups, and older children in schools or church groups can be encouraged to donate them.

Many books are appropriate for all children. However, since most of the children of imprisoned parents live in poverty, it is important to avoid books that are focused on middle class suburban stories. There are excellent multicultural books available that the

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parents would be delighted to read to their children. Children who donate books should be encouraged to find books that they would enjoy themselves. They can often get them from paperback book clubs at school. Books cannot have stickers or other "extras" if they are to be allowed into a jail or prison. It's important to get some baby books with cardboard covers for very young children -- even those books can be multicultural.

Besides paperbacks and 60-minute audiotapes, you will need padded mailing envelopes and the cost of postage. You will need to find an organization willing to cover this cost-- which can add up. You will be surprised to find that there are groups quite willing to be involved in this. Occasionally the correctional center will do the mailing.

WITH THE MOTHER OR FATHER

A few volunteers can run this program in a prison or jail. A teacher who can sort the books according to age level would be helpful. The parents should have a choice of books, but these should be limited since usually the parent won't have long to make selections. If there is time, the parent may want to write a note to his or her child inside the front cover of each book. In some programs every child receives a book, though perhaps only one or two are read onto tape. If the parent is reading to an older child they only read the first chapter and then they suggest that the child finish the book and write to them about it.

To begin with, the parent should greet every child by name and just talk to them. Volunteers should be ready with Kleenex and ready to push the recorder's 'pause' button if the mom or dad gets choked up. Do not be surprised if they cry a little and be ready with encouragement if one says, "I can't do this." Say you will help with a word if they get stuck and tell them the pause button is always handy. Don't let them hear the tape unless you are finished, because hearing it will just make them more self-conscious.

The parent will surely want to tell you about their children, so realize that this is a way for them to tell their story in a setting that doesn't often lend itself to listening. This is a very important role of the volunteer. However, make no promises. The volunteer is just there to do this project. Always keep that in mind. Also, don't give out personal information. Even if the person you are speaking to has good intentions, nothing stays private in a jail or prison. Additionally, you would be breaking Department of Corrections rules.

When finished reading, ask the parent if he/she would like to say good-bye to the children and also add a word of thanks to their caregiver, most often the grandmother. When finished, press the squares out of the edge of the cassette casing so that the youngsters can't tape over the recording by mistake.

If the correctional facility mails the tapes and books, simply have the mother or father write the address on the envelope.

If you mail the envelope, have a form for the parents to fill out, including the names and addresses of all the children. (If they don't live together you will have to make separate tapes for them.) Make sure you have the name of the caregiver of the children as well as that person's phone number, in case the package comes back to you. Afterwards, add to the form the name of the volunteer who taped the parent. When mailing the books and tape, put the initials of the volunteer and a post office box # or organization address on the return address. The volunteers should not use their own address.

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SOME EXTRA INFORMATION

- **Always** follow the jail and prison rules, no matter how much you may question them. These are first and foremost security institutions. Everything you might be able to do counts on **your good reputation** with Corrections officials.
- Every Department of Corrections has its own way of dealing with new volunteers coming into a facility. Some evaluations are complicated, time consuming and extensive, often including drug and TB tests. It may be quite frustrating to get a large number of volunteers vetted to be volunteers, so start with a few "diehards" at first.
- Different groups do storybook projects in different ways. Some do it as the ending part of a parenting class or part of a literacy class. Many do it as a special event before Christmas or Mother's/Father's Day.
- Don't forget that parents are located in county jails, state and federal prisons. No doubt there is one of these facilities by you.
- Some programs make this a weekly effort with a few volunteers and some monthly with more volunteers. A lot of this depends on how the prison authorities think it will work best for them.
- Realize there will be a lot of waiting time while inmates are called. They may not be available on many occasions; don't be surprised by disappointment.
- Ask for a location where there won't be a lot of noise and where you can plug in the recorders.
- Have quick-to-read handouts to give the parents so they can decide if they want to take part in the program. You may go to a tier to explain the program to a large group and then have the inmate fill out a request. Or the prison may take care of that and choose the participants and have the parents ready for the program when you arrive.
- Make sure the prison gets some good publicity for their part in the program. If they are willing to stick out their neck and cooperate, they deserve it.
- Don't forget that there will be some people who sincerely think you shouldn't be doing this. Listen to what they have to say and then share your own positive experience.

IF WE CAN BE OF ANY MORE HELP, e-mail Pat Davis
(Pat.Davis@LSSI.org) of Lutheran Social Services of IL or Karen Hutt
(Karen.Hutt@SBCGlobal.net) of Companions, Journeying Together, Inc.

THANK YOU! LET US KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING!