

Instructor aims to make inmates better parents: 'You have to find a common ground'



Rosemarie Grabowski of Indiana Parenting Institute talks to inmates about bonding with their children at Lake County Corrections. (Meredith Colias / Post-Tribune)

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To lower a barrier and hope for trust, Rosemarie Grabowski tells inmates she once spent time in jail. For her, though, it was only for a couple of hours after a failure to show in small claims court, she said.

Yet, as Grabowski, 62, Indiana Parenting Institute's Manager of Family Education and Support, walks carefully into the Lake County Community Corrections' basement in Crown Point each month, she connects with the imprisoned men through empathy and willingness to let some of her own past show.

"They freak, because I tell them, 'Oh, I was in jail,'" she said. "They are like, 'Huh?' You have to find a common ground with somebody to sell something and I'm selling myself."

Last year, the Lake County Corrections accepted a proposal by the Indiana Parenting Institute for a parenting

skills class for inmates, said Loni Brittingham, a Quality Assurance Manager.

Based on a similar program for female inmates, the purpose of the one-year program at Community Corrections is to reach inmates to help them be a better example to their own children. About 15 inmates have attended multiple classes held twice per month at the jail, said IPI founder Laura Smith-Wynn. Sessions started in February.

"A lot of families that we work with, they are in jail because of substance abuse," she said. "We care about kids, we want kids to have a better lives. We want parents that really understand how to love their children."

"What we find is that (incarcerated) parents ... do not understand their behavior in terms of how that impacts their children," Smith-Wynn said. "They have the responsibility to nurture the development of that child's brain and that child's well-being.

"When that falls apart, it impacts the development of the child," she said. "We are creating another generation of children that become wards of the state, substance abusers, people that drop out of school."

Grabowski, one of two main instructors, said she views her role as mixing kindness with frankness, using mom skills to reach them — mainly listening to what they have to say, instilling self-love and calling them out on a failure to take full responsibility for their actions. Some respond, some don't, she said.

"She has a naturalness with people," Smith-Wynn said. "What she brings is compassion. She has that level of authority. She knows how to assess your situation. She knows how to listen attentively to what our parents are saying."

After growing up in Gary's Glen Park neighborhood, Grabowski eventually left for Florida for years before returning to Northwest Indiana in the mid-1990s.

Married and divorced, she worked as a struggling parent in a variety of jobs to make ends meet — in the medical field, selling cars, selling transmissions, logistics and waitressing, she said.

Her daughter, one of two grown children, is now a Valparaiso University professor.

Breaking the cycle

At the jail, each parenting class has a separate theme, such as how to properly discipline children or deal with high levels of stress — aiming to break intergenerational cycles of abuse and toxicity.

Parents are the examples to their children on how to behave, she often told inmates. A first step for them is more honestly addressing responsibility for what got them in jail, Grabowski said.

"They are always the victim, even though they are the perpetrator, they (think they) are the victim," she said. "A lot of them don't understand responsibility, a lot of them are habituals. Because, (underlying) issues have

never been addressed. Their ills have never been cured."

Some inmates, ready to open up, talked to her about how they were abused at the hands of their fathers. One inmate told how his father beat him so badly as a teen, slamming his head repeatedly against the wall, he ended up in the hospital.

"Most of them have never been in that household that was totally functional," she said. "Or, been in that household where people really cared."

They were "not raised to be emotional, and if you are told you can't be a man if you cry, you are not a man if you show any kind of affection, that could take a toll on you," she said. When "trying to be a whole, functioning human being, you can't if these parts of your personality are not allowed to emerge.

"So, that causes problems," she said.

Building rapport

Inmates are often hungry to open up as they build trust. They begin willingly coming to the class to talk, sensing she will listen to their concerns.

"I'm not going to make you listen to what I have to say," she said later. "Because, what you have to say is more important than anything I have to say. And that's the way it is."

They often push back in discussions — citing their own resiliency and ability to survive abusive and tragic childhoods. They decided who they wanted to be, ultimately regardless of their upbringing, inmates oftentimes say.

Grabowski dismissed that argument, challenging them to take responsibility for their children's development.

"You need to talk about why you are here," Grabowski said later. "We need to understand why you are here and then we need to understand what do we need to do to change it?"

Success is 'never seeing them again'

Grabowski said she couldn't know what percentage of inmates would make enough changes to ultimately stay out of jail. Realistically, the percentage is low.

Easy gratification and old habits await upon their release, she said, as well as society's stigmatization against former prisoners.

"Everybody sees God when they are in jail," she said. "That's all well and good, but as soon as you get out, the devil is knocking at your door."

Success would be "never seeing them again, not ever seeing them in jail again," Grabowski said.

"It's up to you ... with all the knowledge I have to share to accept it or not," she said. "I can't make anybody do anything.

"My satisfaction (is) that light bulb went off," Grabowski said. "There's nothing like that. It's very self-satisfying when I hear a parent say, I went home and did what you told me and it worked."

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