

# Fathers in Utah County Jail Can Learn to Rebuild Family Connections Thanks to a New Class



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By National Fatherhood Initiative®

For most of her childhood, Linda Donaldson (pictured above) said she watched her alcoholic father spend time in and out of jail.

She visited him once at a halfway house, but she always wished he could have known how much she loved him.

“I don’t know if he ever knew how much his involvement in our life, sober, impacted us,” she said.

As a volunteer teacher at the Utah County Jail, she noticed almost all of the men struggle with the same problem as her father.

Many incarcerated men do not know how to form meaningful connections with their families, particularly their children, she explained.

“There is a lot of heartache,” Donaldson said. “They have almost given up because they don’t have the tools they need.”

To teach fathers how to connect with their children, she helped establish the program **InsideOut Dad**® at the Utah County Jail.

“It can be a very rewarding experience. Where else do we get this kind of time set aside to be able to work on ourselves?” Donaldson said.

The InsideOut Dad® program was created by the **National Fatherhood Initiative**® to teach incarcerated fathers how to connect to their families. The program provides a free workbook with lessons on how to show and handle feelings, taking care of physical and mental health and what it means to be a man.

Before starting the six-week program, Donaldson received extensive training through Healthy Relationships Utah, a Utah State University Extension program. The program is available through the university extension.

She then met with 15 men at the jail for two hours a week to teach them different ways to build a relationship with their children.

“When I ask them ‘What is the No. 1 thing that you want for your child?’ a lot of times, they will say ‘honesty’ or ‘not to repeat the mistakes they’ve made,’” Donaldson said.

She shared a story about one inmate who was heartbroken because he had no idea how to connect with his three children. But after taking the course, the man memorized a fatherhood pledge in English and Spanish and swore to be “an involved, responsible and committed father.”

“The smiles on their faces are pretty rewarding,” Donaldson said. “I would like to see every father who is here to go through the course.”

This isn’t the first time Donaldson has taught classes specifically for men. For 13 years, she taught safety driving courses to truck drivers. She has also volunteered to teach transition classes at the Utah State Prison.

“I’ve seen what they’ve gone through by working in the jails and prison. I want to give back and help them see their value,” she said.

When fathers are absent from their homes, children are more likely to face abuse or neglect, struggle with behavioral problems, commit crimes, go to prison or abuse drugs and alcohol, according to statistics from the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Children are twice as likely to drop out from high school, suffer from obesity, end up in poverty and girls are seven times more likely to become pregnant as teenagers.

But if fathers want to build relationships with their children, Donaldson said it is also essential for men to build relationships with the “gatekeeper” of the child, who is often the mother in charge of protecting her children.

“There’s a push for fathers to recognize their importance in their family and children’s lives,” she explained. “If you want to connect with your child, you have to have a healthy relationship with the mother of the child.”

The program also teaches different types of parenting styles as well as the stages of child development. Another emphasis is how to co-parent and set specific goals on how to raise a child.

Some of the men in the program were expectant fathers or uncles who wanted to be more present in the lives of the children in their family.



“I get to show them how important they are and that caring for themselves and making a connection to their children can make a difference for generations,” Donaldson said.

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