Longitudinal Impact of Social Emotional Learning Program for Children of Incarcerated Parents

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Author Note

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Abstract

This is the abstract about my study.

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Introduction

According to the National Survey of Children's Health, researchers estimate that more than five million children experienced parental incarceration in 2015 (Murphey, 2015). This study also shows that the majority of these children fall within the school age range and are disproportionately Black. Parental incarceration is identified as an adverse childhood experience (ACE) that often co-occurs with other ACEs such as living with a household drug user or witnessing abuse (Scott, Burke, Weems, Hellman, & Carrión, 2013). This co-occurrence can intensify the negative impacts of parental incarceration (e.g., increased risk of intergenerational crime, substance use, and depressive symptoms) on children (Poehlmann-Tynan & Eddy, 2019).

Parental incarceration substantially impacts family units, especially the children within these families. Children of incarcerated parents (COIP) often develop insecure attachments with their caregivers (Murray & Murray, 2010), which contributes to a range of emotional and psychological difficulties, including depression (Spruit et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study by Dallaire and Wilson (2010) revealed how children who witnessed parental incarceration-related events can further impact them as they showed more depressive and anxiety symptoms than COIP who did not witness such events. This study also found that the children who witnessed parental incarceration-related events performed worse academically than those who did not.

A wide body of research demonstrates the significant roles that emotion regulation and resilience play in a child's overall emotional well-being (Macklem, 2010; Mihic & Novak, 2018; Morie, Crowley, Mayes, & Potenza, 2022). These constructs are especially important for COIP, as they are at an increased risk of exposure to adversity.

The current research examines changes in children's emotional competencies as they progress through a SEL program designed for COIP. We are particularly interested in the long-term impacts of the program and determining how the effects of the program may differ for returners to the program compared to new members. Overall,

we expect emotion coping scores to increase from fall to spring each academic year (hypothesis one) and inhibited and dysregulated emotional responses to decrease (hypothesis two). We also expect resilience scores to increase overall (hypothesis three).

Method

This study was conducted in collaboration with the non-profit Assisting Families of Inmates (AFOI) and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). AFOI manages participant recruitment and trains the VCU Master of Social Work (MSW) interns who administer the program and lead each session. Through the MAC program, AFOI is dedicated to supporting elementary-aged school children with one or both parents, or other family members, incarcerated.

Participants

Participants were recruited from eight public schools across Richmond, Virginia. They must have had at least one incarcerated parent or family member and be enrolled in the MAC program at their school. At the beginning of each school year, teachers distributed an interest form for parents and caregivers to complete to enroll their child in the program.

Participants' ages ranged from seven to 11 years (grades second through fifth), and all participants were African American or Black, except for one who was Hispanic.

Procedure

Trained research assistants traveled to public schools for data collection. Baseline data was collected in the early fall of each academic year, a few weeks after the start of school, and follow-up data collection occurred in the spring of each academic year, about six months later. Makeup data collection days were scheduled for the following week of each data collection time point for children who had been absent or enrolled later. Each caregiver gave consent for their child to participate, and child participants also gave their assent before completing the surveys. Qualtrics surveys were administered digitally via tablets. Through the surveys, participants complete measures of rugged resilience and anger and sadness management in the early fall and spring of each academic year. Research assistants read surveys to children unable to do

so themselves and clarified any confusing questions or vocabulary. Once the survey was complete, responses were uploaded into Qualtrics, and children were compensated for their time with pencils and sticker sheets.

Results

Primary analyses were divided into two phases: hypothesis testing and exploratory analyses. For the main hypothesis testing, paired sample t-tests were conducted on all outcome variables to assess overall changes from fall to spring within each academic year. Following this, exploratory analyses began by using mixed-design ANOVAs with the within-subject factor being time and the between-subject factor being participant characteristics (e.g., sex and returner status) to examine whether changes differed as a function of participant characteristics. This approach allowed for the detection of interaction effects that would not be captured by t-tests alone. When significant interactions were identified, simple effects analyses were conducted to probe the nature of the interaction, typically by comparing change over time within each subgroup or comparing groups at each time point using estimated marginal means. Since key participant characteristics were dichotomous, post-hoc comparisons were not required. Additional exploratory analyses used independent sample t-tests to compare differences between returners and new members' baseline scores.

Returners start with lower scores of anger inhibition in academic year 1 (AY1) compared to new members (see table 1).

Returners ($T1$: $M = 36.11$, $SE = 2.48$; $T2$: $M = 39.67$, $SE = 2.02$) compared to new members ($T1$: $M = 37.47$, $SE = 1.92$; $T2$: $M = 34.53$, $SE = 1.57$) experienced greater gains in resilience scores, $F(1, 22) = 4.51$, $p = .054$, $\eta^2 = .159$ (see Figure 1). Means from T1 and T2 of each group can also been seen in the bar graph (see Figure 2).

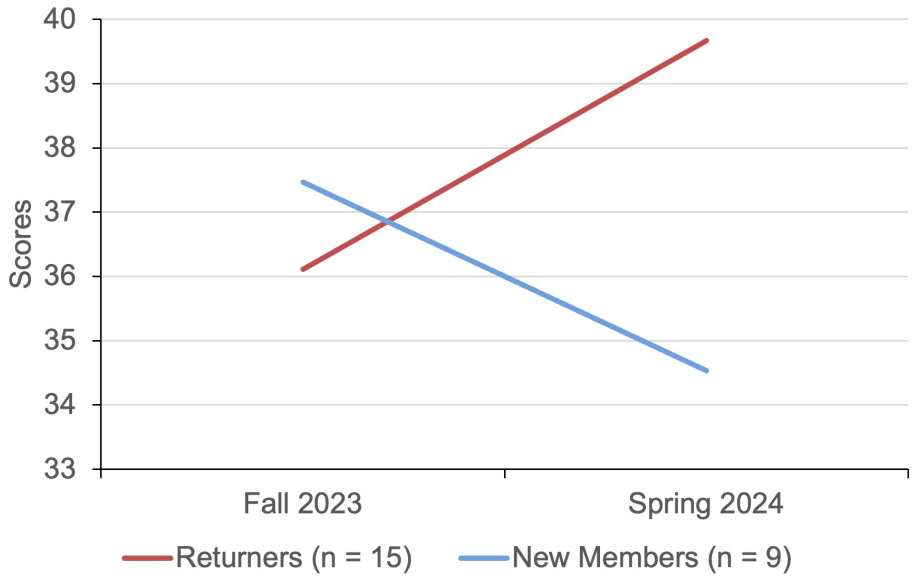
Table 1

Emotion Management and Resilience Measures by Membership Status at T1 in AY1

Measure	New Members			Returners			t	df	p	Cohen's d
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD				
Anger Coping	26	12.35	1.94	14	11.64	1.86	1.11	38	NS	0.37
Anger Dysregulation	26	8.42	1.72	14	8.14	2.07	0.46	38	NS	0.15
Anger Inhibition	27	11.93	1.71	14	10.86	1.41	2.01	39	.051	0.66
Sad Coping	26	15.50	3.44	13	15.54	2.22	-0.04	37	NS	-0.01
Sad Dysregulation	24	8.88	1.65	13	9.31	0.85	-0.88	35	NS	-0.30
Sad Inhibition	25	11.80	1.85	13	12.15	1.72	-0.57	36	NS	-0.19
Rugged Resilience	26	26.19	7.62	13	34.77	8.50	0.53	37	NS	0.18

Figure 1

Time x Group Interaction for Rugged Resilience in Academic Year One



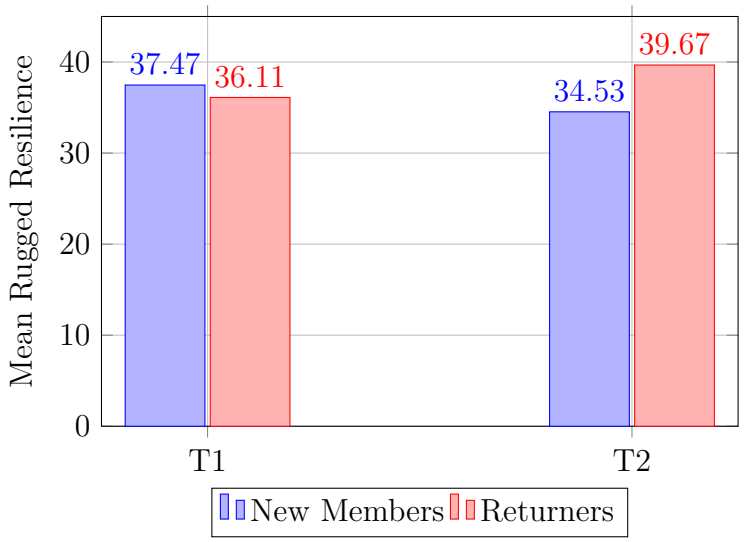
Note. $F(1, 22) = 4.51$, $p = .054$, $\eta^2 = .159$.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that school-based SEL programming can promote resilience and build emotion management skills among children of incarcerated parents.

Figure 2

Mean Rugged Resilience Scores for New Members and Returners Across Time



Note. $F(1, 22) = 4.51$, $p = .054$, $\eta^2 = .159$.

Returners appeared to benefit more in specific domains, emphasizing the importance of continued and repeated program participation. These results offer practical insights for future program implementation and evaluation, continuing the growing effort to support COIP through developmentally informed, person-centered interventions.

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