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**Bridging the Gap Between Incarcerated Mothers and their Children: An Ecological
Perspective**

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Introduction

Approximately 5 million children in America are either currently being affected by maternal incarceration, or have previously been affected (Hardy, 2018). Women only represent about 7% of the incarcerated population, however, most of the women are mothers. This causes the effects of the mother's incarceration to trickle down and impact other members of her family (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017). A combination of physical separation and societal pressure due to not meeting the expectations of motherhood create the maternal distress felt by many mothers during incarceration (Hardy, 2018). Most female correctional facilities offer parenting programs; however, a lack of standardized guidelines results in many of these programs being ineffective (Tremblay & Sutherland, 2017). Often, an increase in familial strain is experienced because of ineffective parenting programs and interventions (Delgado & Barragan, 2019). When considering the environmental impact of incarceration, the Ecological Model can be applied to Recreational Therapy practice to help mothers improve their coping skills and reduce the strain placed on family relationships.

Explanation of theoretical/conceptual framework

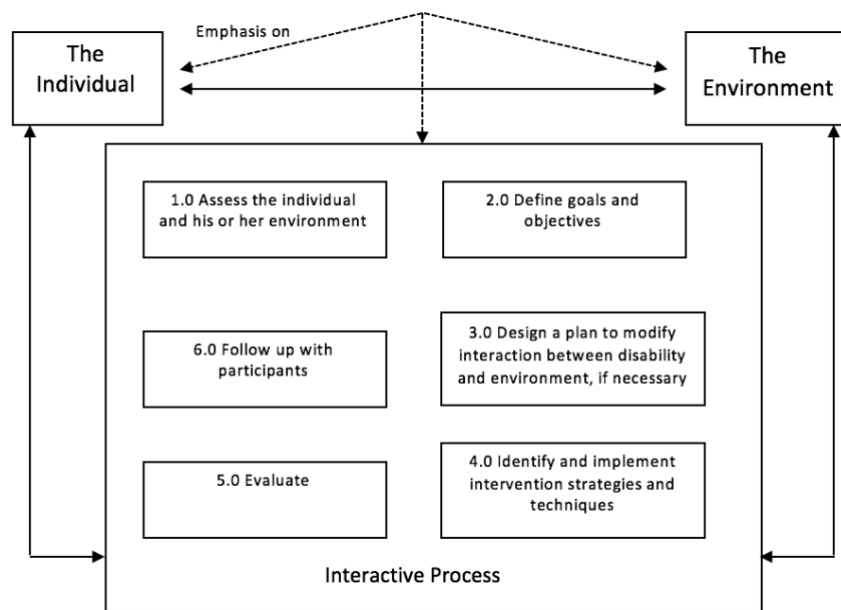
The Ecological Model aims to utilize leisure to help individuals grow and improve their overall well-being (Anderson & Heyne, 2012). An emphasis is placed on both the individual and their environment and how the two interact. This interaction between the individual and their environment is portrayed as a source of disability (Wise, 2016). When applying the Ecological Model to practice, a Recreational Therapist would aim to implement the APIE process at both the individual and environmental level (Anderson & Heyne, 2012).

Application and translation of research/concept/theory in RT practice

To address the experienced familial strain, it is encouraged that a mother modifies the interactions she has with the prison environment. Improving coping skills will allow mothers who are incarcerated to change the perceptions they have of their environment and begin addressing the relationship with their children. Even though the Ecological Model has not been utilized directly with mothers who are incarcerated, the components of the model can be implemented within recreational therapy practice. Coping skills groups can be facilitated using role playing techniques where the mothers act out various interactions with their children. A focus should also be placed on parenting programs so the mothers are prepared to return to their parenting role post release. Mothers who are incarcerated have unique experiences that only previously incarcerated mothers can understand. A mentorship program can be developed that pairs previously incarcerated mothers with those who are currently incarcerated. Collaborative efforts are encouraged so Recreational Therapists can partner with programs such as Parenting Inside Out and Free2Succeed that can provide support tailored to mothers who are incarcerated (Parenting Inside Out, n.d.; Idaho Department of Corrections, n.d.). Creating a safe space where children can feel comfortable visiting with their mothers can also help improve their relationship. A Recreational Therapist can facilitate family activities for completion both during visits and post-release to help promote a sense of trust.

Tables/Figures

**Figure 1. The Ecological Model
(Anderson & Heyne, 2012)**



References

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