

CHILDREN OF CRIMINALS

Mentors seek to prevent kids from repeating parents' errors

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Encarnacion Pyle

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Chris Johnson's father never played a large role in his life, but he left an indelible mark before being sent to prison on gun charges two years ago.

Until recently, the 13-year-old West Side boy defined himself with the words he says he heard over and over from his father: You're fat, stupid and lazy.

His grades had plummeted from A's and B's to D's and F's.

And he saw his future as futile.

Then Chris met Dan Kerscher, a retired lawyer from Upper Arlington who had a simple goal: to make as many ordinary days extraordinary for the "bright, charming and funny" middle-school student.

"I'm not trying to replace his father," Kerscher said. "I'm a person he can be comfortable with and turn to when he needs a friend."

The goal is to break the cycle of crime, to prevent a disturbing trend: Children whose parents go to prison often end up there as well.

These are the goals of a \$750,000 federal grant that Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio will use to expand statewide its mentoring program for children who have a parent in prison.

The central Ohio group serves 400 children of incarcerated parents and hopes to reach 150 more within a year. Statewide, the agency hopes to help 2,000 more children in 70-plus counties by 2009.

"An estimated 7.3 million in the United States have a parent in prison or (who has) left the system. And up to 70 percent will end up in jail themselves unless a mentor or



Chris Johnson, 13, wants to become a lawyer like his Big Brother, Dan Kerscher, of Upper Arlington.

another caring adult intervenes in their lives," said Ed Cohn, chief executive officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio.

Children of prisoners have always been among the mix of kids in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. But in 2001, the Big Brothers Big Sisters group in Philadelphia, where the national group is based, started to target children with at least one parent in prison because of their vulnerability to fail in school, at home and in life.

They called the program Amachi, a west African word that means "who knows but what God has brought us through this child." More than 120 Big Brothers Big Sisters programs across the country have mentoring programs for children of prisoners.

"We are resolved to break the cycle of incarceration," said Judy Vredenburg, president and chief executive officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. "This is a scourge on our nation and on our hearts as well."

Black men are particularly hard-hit, experts say. About one-third of black men ages 16 to 24 are either in jail or prison or on parole or probation, according to research.

Regardless of race, school-age children with a parent in prison are more prone to act out in school, drop out or have problems with relationships, said Mark Scott, director of community partnerships for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

But an independent study found that children matched to a "big brother" or "big sister" are 52 percent less likely to skip school, 46 percent less likely to use drugs, 33 percent less likely to hit someone and 27 percent less likely to drink alcohol.

"I know there are at least 20,000 children who now have a chance to end up in college and not in prison," said the Rev. W. Wilson Goode Sr., a former Philadelphia mayor who organized the first Amachi program.

For Chris, having a "big brother" he can just as easily tease as have heart-to-heart talks has boosted his confidence, improved his school performance and given him an outlet to be an "ordinary teenager."

"They matched me up with Dan and my life has changed," Chris said. "I want to become a lawyer, play football in college and minor in sports medicine.

"I believe in myself and what I can do."