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## LEADER'S GUIDE:

**Back in Touch** by Eric Benson

I'm getting to know my son after 14 years apart.

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### DISCUSSION FOCUS:

Coping with separation.

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### ACTIVITY GOAL:

Participants will identify coping skills to handle separation from a child and to reestablish a connection.

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### STORY SUMMARY

*Eric's son was only 4 months old when Eric was incarcerated. Soon after, his child's mother decided not to allow their son to have contact with his father. Over the next 14 years, Eric attempted to re-establish a relationship with his son. He also took steps to mature and educate himself so he would be a capable parent if given the chance to reconnect.*

*Finally, Eric's son's mother relented and his son visited him in prison. Through letters and visits, they began to reconnect. Eric hopes to prevent his son from making the mistakes he made at his age.*

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### GROUP INTRODUCTION: Read Aloud

Today we're going to talk about how we can remain hopeful and productive during painful separations from our children. Parents can end up separated from their children for many reasons: foster care placement, incarceration, divorce, mental health issue, or economic necessity. If it is not within our power to reunify with our children, we can feel hopeless and powerless, bitter, angry, or misunderstood. Taking steps to improve our own lives and prepare for eventual reunification can help parents feel more confident and in control.

- How do you feel about this topic?
- Do you have experiences related to this topic that you'd like to share before we get started?

## READ AND DISCUSS STORY: 15 + 30 minutes

Read the story out loud as a group. Help participants recognize the writer's emotions and coping mechanisms and their own. Go back over important moments in the story and ask the participants about how they've handled similar experiences:

STORY MOMENT	DISCUSSION QUESTION
Eric remembers a few positive, loving moments with his son.	What memories of your child sustain you?
Eric wrote letters year after year, asking for contact with his son.	What steps have you taken to reestablish contact with your child?
Eric decided to educate himself, including taking a parenting class, so he could become a responsible father.	What steps have you taken - or could you take - to prepare yourself for reunification?
Words of encouragement from other prisoners helped Eric persevere.	Who supports you in remaining persistent in reconnecting with your child?
After they reconnect, Eric begins to tell his son his story through letters and visits.	How could you begin now to tell your story to your child? (Putting together a scrapbook, writing down your story, etc.)

## JOURNAL TIME: 15-30 minutes

By writing in their journals, participants can more deeply reflect on their own experiences. Hand out the "Journal Reflections" worksheet and give participants time to write. They can share their responses with the group or in pairs, or after the workshop with a peer, family member, therapist or other important person in their lives.

NAME:

DATE:

**JOURNAL REFLECTIONS: Back in Touch** by Eric Benson

Eric was separated from his son for 14 years after he was incarcerated when his son was 4 months old. Although his child's mother believed it was best to end contact, she relented because he continued to contact her, asking for contact with his son. After their first visit, Eric and his son begin to build a bond through letters and visits.

Take some time to reflect on the steps you can take to continue seeking a relationship with your child and to prepare to be a positive parent after you reconnect.

1. What motivates you to stay focused on reunifying with your child?

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2. What obstacles do you face in reunifying with your child?

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3. Who supports you in reconnecting with your child? Who else could support you?

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OVER 

4. What could help you prepare for reconnecting and grow as a person and a parent?

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**ACTION STEPS**

Eric used letters to convince his son’s mother to allow him to visit and to share his life with his son after their first visit. What would want to say in a letter to your child? Who could you write to for help with your efforts to reconnect?

Use the space below to begin a letter. Explain in your letter the steps you’ve taken so far and the steps you plan to take to reconnect with your child.

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**A SUPPORTIVE CONNECTION**

I plan to get support and encouragement by talking about my reflections and action steps with:

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